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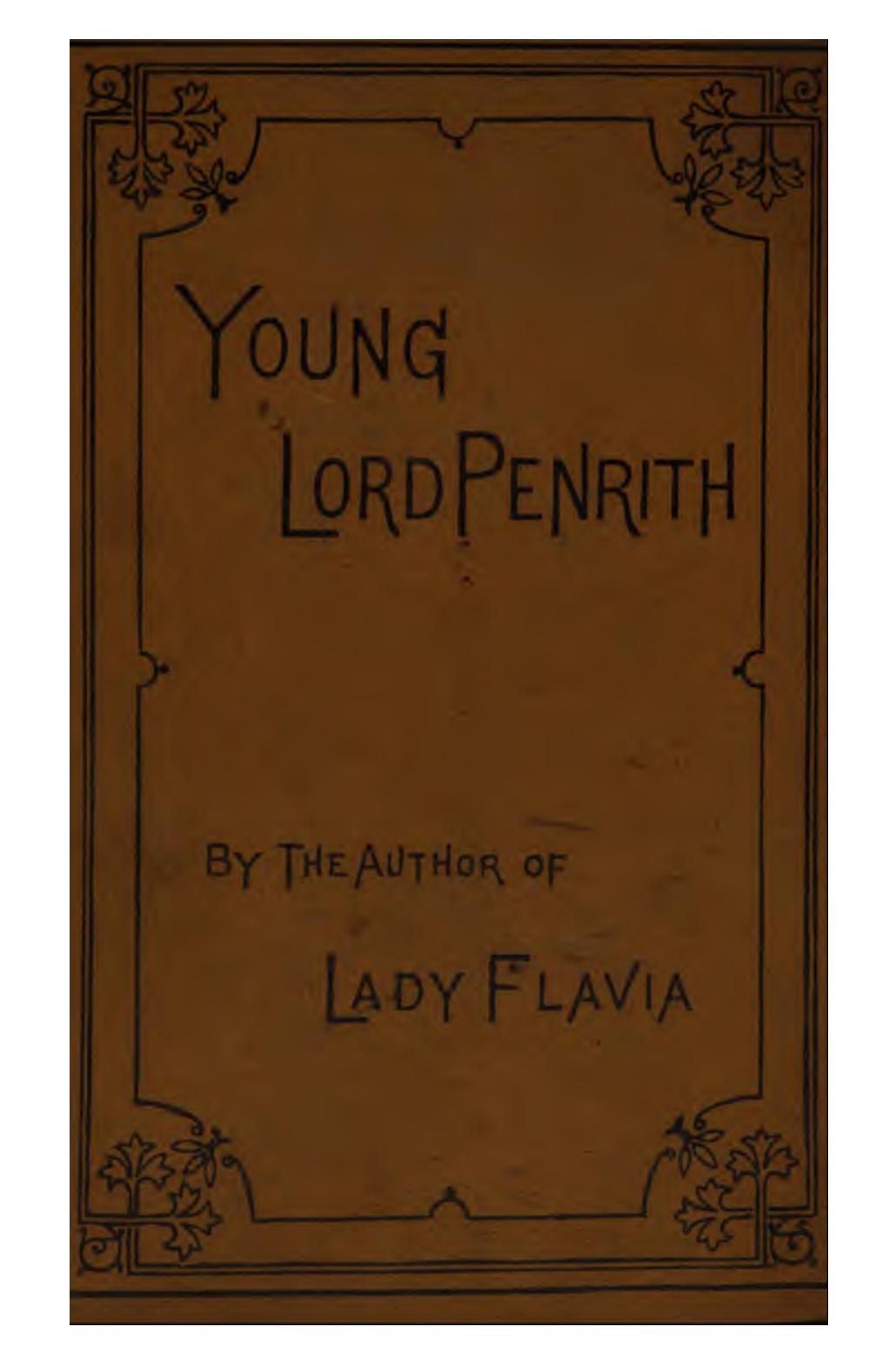
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YOUNG LORD PENRITH

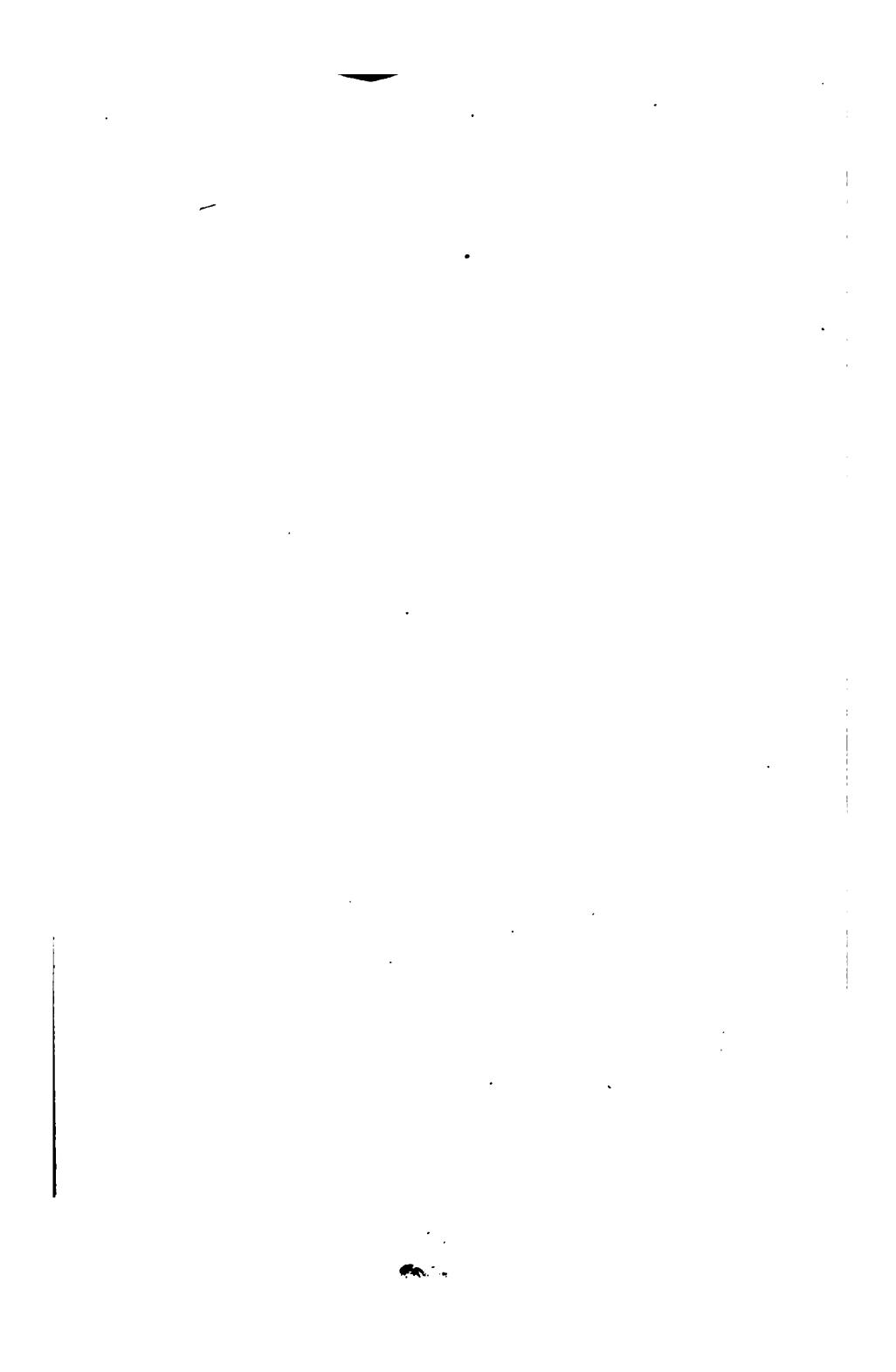
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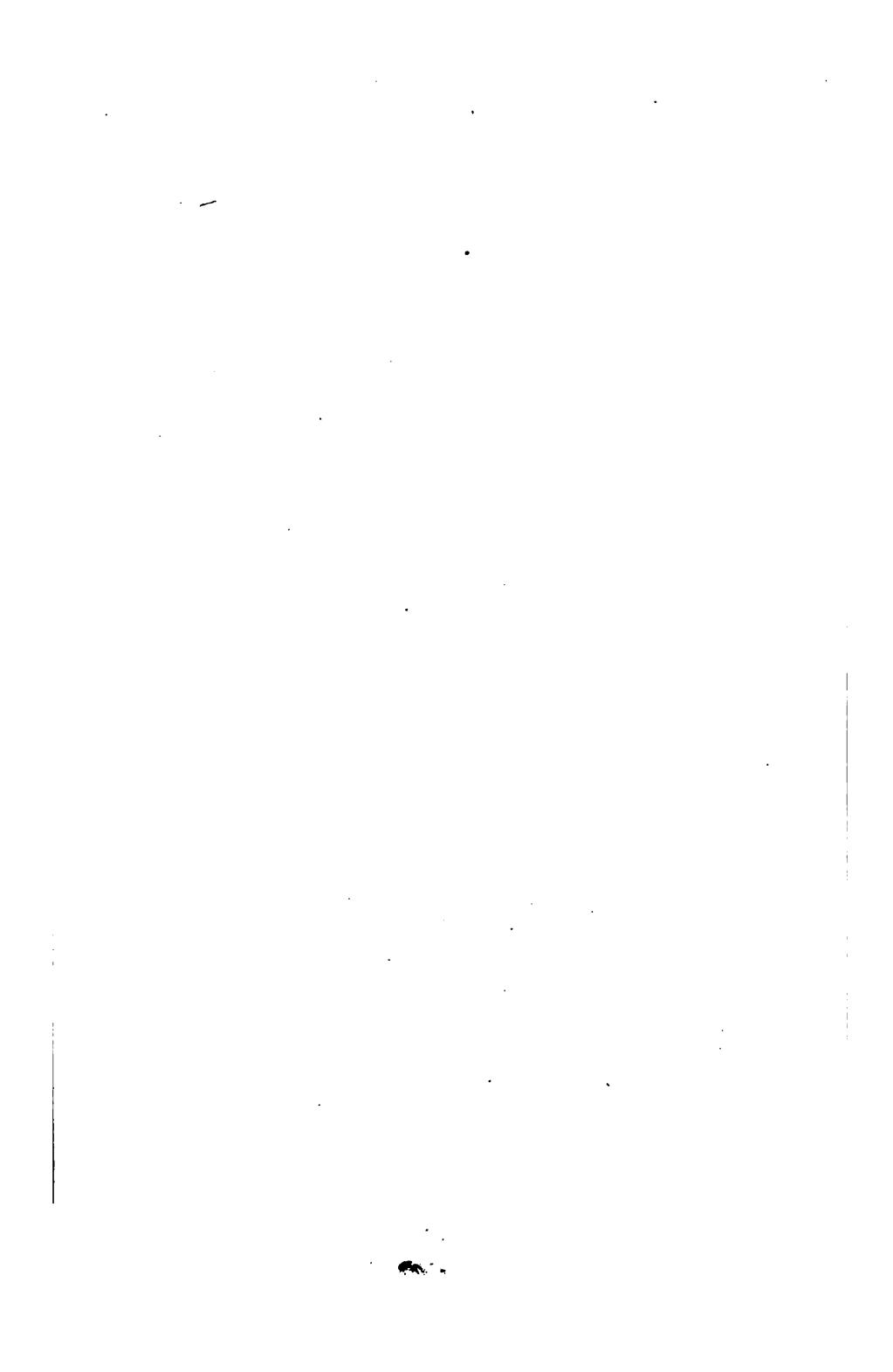
YOUNG LORD PENRITH.

VOL. II.



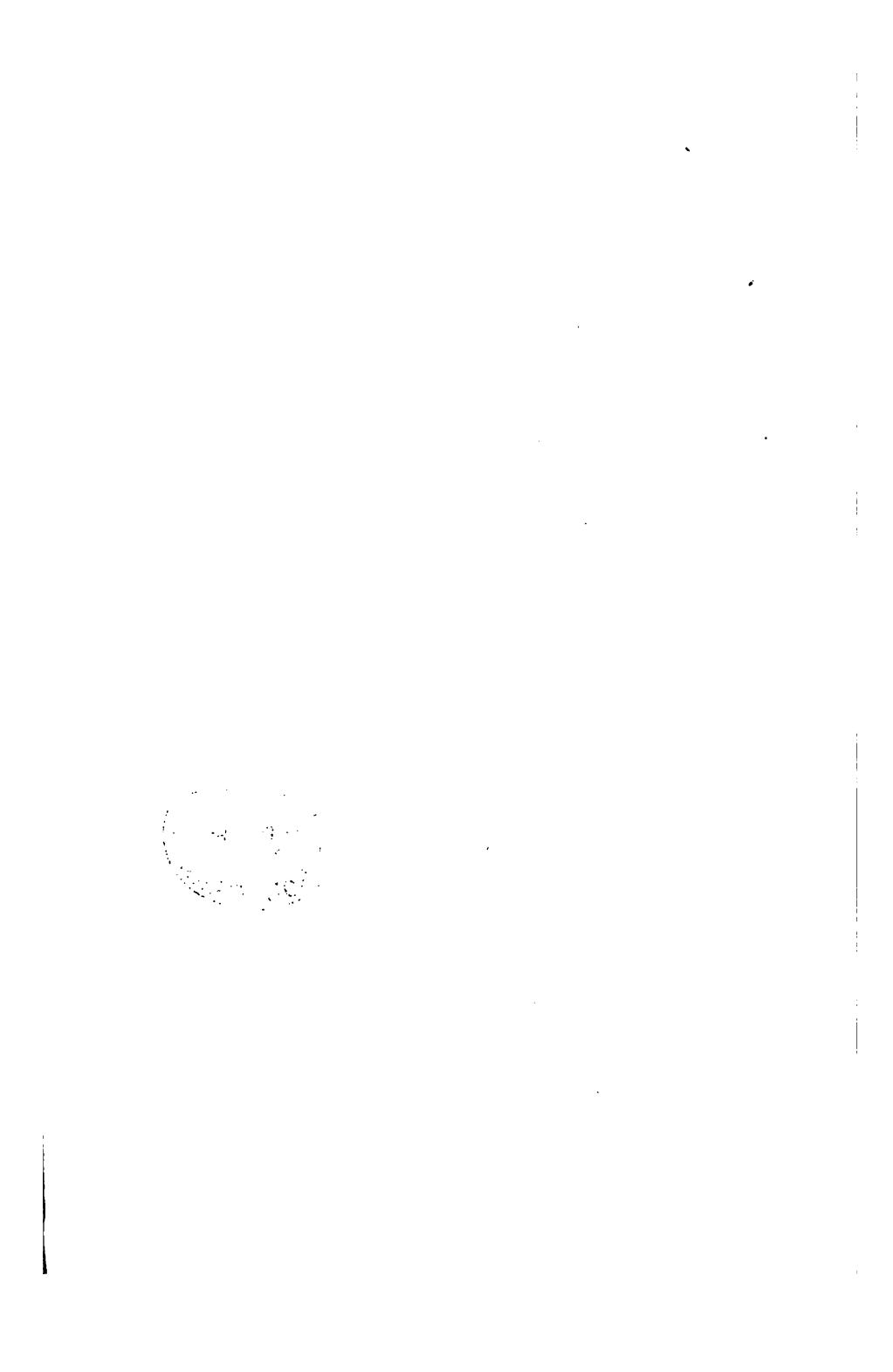
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YOUNG LORD PENRITH.

VOL. II.



YOUNG LORD PENRITH

BY

JOHN BERWICK HARWOOD

AUTHOR OF

“LADY FLAVIA,” “LORD LYNN'S WIFE,”
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
18, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1880.

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251 - f - 522

LONDON :
PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD,
BLENHEIM HOUSE.

YOUNG LORD PENRITH.

CHAPTER I.

AN AMBASSADRESS EXTRAORDINARY.

IT is curious how the match-making instinct can blind good women every day to the mischief they may do when they strive to join hands that are best unlinked, and to weld together hearts that have no single throb in common. Why did Mrs. Perkins and her three good-natured daughters toil and slave and scheme, with such

absolute abnegation of self, to wed Angelina Brown, the Manchester heiress, to young Edwin Fitzscamp? Mr. Fitzscamp was legally and conventionally Honourable, it is true; but then he was over head and ears in debt, would have robbed his dearest friend any day for a ten-pound note, and was not on speaking terms with his father, Lord Scampington. Poor Angelina was stupid, perhaps, but innocent and honest, and she and her sixty thousand pounds deserved to fall into better hands than those spendthrift ones of Fitzscamp.

Lady Larpent was so shrewd that her conscience was not quite comfortable as she set forth in search of Maud, her niece, to do her son's errand. But she lulled it to sleep with those moral anodynes of which, it is to be feared, we most of us keep a

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stock in store ; and by the time the interview began had almost persuaded herself that the most proper arrangement in the world would be a matrimonial alliance between Miss Stanhope and her kinsman, Sir Lucius. She thought, as has been previously said, ill of her son, and well of Maud. But then her son was her son, and blood is thicker than water, and it would steady Lucius to be tied for life to such a consort as sweet Maud. And, without stopping to consider whether the possible advantage to be gained was worth the price to be paid for it, Lady Larpent buckled to her work.

“Maud, my dearest, you have made your old aunt very, very unhappy,” said the Dowager, feelingly.

This was not quite a true statement.

Lady Larpent was not unhappy, but only bent on bringing about a match between two persons remarkably ill suited to one another; yet Maud was touched. Her aunt had been very kind to her since the unfor-gotten days of her childhood. To make her aunt unhappy, even in theory, was distressing to her.

“I mean—about Lucius,” said the Dowager, by way of explanation.

“Has he—spoken to you, then?” asked Maud.

“Yes, my dear, he has indeed,” replied the Dowager; “and I can tell you that he has taken very much to heart the answer you gave him. You know, my pet, how much I love you both. He is my own son, and you have always been as dear to me as a daughter. Why cannot you two

understand each other, and learn to be happy together?"

Maud did not reply save by a gesture of negation.

"Lucius really loves you," pursued the Dowager, warming to her work, exactly as a barrister forces on himself a sort of mock belief in the client whom he knows to be a rascal. "I have never seen him so earnest before—never. His sincere wish is to make you happy. Your love, my dear, is all he wants to steady him for ever, and to give him a purpose in life and an object for exertion. He is clever, you know."

"I always thought so. I always thought he could make a name in the world, if he pleased," returned Miss Stanhope, glad to gratify her kind aunt by some safe praise, as she considered, of her son. Indeed, that

Lucius had abilities fitted to win distinction, if only he would condescend to use them, was a cardinal article of faith in the family. Many a languid coxcomb other than he is similarly credited by admiring aunts and sympathetic sisters with the power to become Premier or Lord Chancellor, if he would but take the preliminary trouble.

“He could—he could!” repeated Lady Larpent, mentally scoring a point in the game; “and it only rests with you, my own Maud, to make him what you will, and to be proud of his success. I’d take care he had a seat in Parliament,” added the Dowager, as confidently as she would have pledged herself that he should have a carriage or a service of plate; “and then, you know, he must be in the House of Lords

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some day. It would be a good thing for you, love. It would be a good thing for him. Money, title, connection, just as they should be. Let me go and tell him, from you——”

“Tell him nothing from me, dear Aunt Larpent,” said Maud, gently but resolutely, “except what I have told him already. I am sorry to give him pain, and doubly sorry to vex you, but what he wishes can never, never be!”

“Why not?” asked the Dowager, her expressive brows beginning to quiver and dilate at this unexpected opposition. People accustomed continually to have their own way get to consider any check or thwarting as a sort of *lèse-majesté*, or petty treason.

“Because,” said Maud, simply, “I do not love Lucius—not, I mean, as I ought to love my husband.”

“Of course not,” said Lady Larpent, cheerfully. “Of course you have not been used to think of him in that way. He spoke to you suddenly, and with nothing to lead up to it, and the whole thing was a surprise. But, Maud, my own pet, that is a matter which might be trusted to right itself, and which every day will improve. I am an old woman, and have seen a good deal of the world, and I can assure you that love comes quite as often after marriage as before it.”

It may be that Maud Stanhope was of a more romantic temperament than Sophia, Lady Larpent, had been gifted withal. Or it may be that the advice to take Sir Lucius

her cousin for better for worse, in the hope that it might be for better, savoured too much of the hazardous to be congenial to her taste. She merely shook her head sadly, and again intrenched herself in what she felt to be a strong position.

“I am sure I do not love him as I should like to love my husband, if I had one.”

And for the moment Lady Larpent was puzzled. She returned to the charge, however, with new arguments.

“You see, my dearest Maud,” said the lady-paramount of Llosthuel, “we ought not to live entirely to please ourselves. I am sure you will agree with me there. Now both your dear mother and your uncle, Lord Penrith, have, as I happen to know, looked with favourable eyes upon this mar-

riage; and would be sadly disappointed if they thought it was never to be. It would keep the property and the ancient title from going asunder. Ah! you shake your pretty head, my dear; but there cannot be a doubt that my lord will leave you every acre he has to leave. Poor Lucius will have but the bare rank of Lord Penrith. Not but that I should do something for him at once," she hastened to add, "if he married a wife of whom I could approve."

"Then I hope," said Maud, pertinaciously, "that he will find—find some one to love him and to make him happy, whom you too would like, aunt. But it cannot be Maud Stanhope!"

"Pray, may I ask, are you in love with anybody else?" demanded the Dowager, abruptly.

Maud grew crimson.

“I—no—no—I do not love anybody—at least I think not,” she answered, confusedly; and the quaint simplicity of the reply re-assured the old lady.

“I think not, too, my child,” she said, kissing Maud on the forehead. “And I ought not to have made you blush by such a question. But why not make my boy happy, and myself happy too, for that matter, by one little word; and that is, ‘Yes’? It would be such a pleasure to me to have you both to stay with me here at Llosthuel; and I shall feel so lonely when you leave me, Maud, now that Edgar and Willie are gone to school; for of course I cannot keep Lucius always at my apron-strings here in Cornwall. Or, if you would like London better, we could live there for

half the year at least. Do think better of it, Maud."

"Give me a little time," pleaded Maud, staggered but not convinced; and the Dowager, who had perhaps heard of the old French adage as to fortresses that parley and women who listen, purred contentedly as her ears drank in the welcome sound. Of course Maud should not be hurried—no, no. It had all been so very sudden, and she needed not to give her answer that day, or the next, or next week even. Let her think it over; and, in the meantime, might not Lucius, poor fellow, be comforted by a scintilla of hope? "It would make him so happy, Maud."

But Maud, though she had been weak enough to plead for delay, could not be brought to send any sort of message to Sir

Lucius. She would think it over, she said ; and with this Lady Larpent, after a good deal of kissing, and many affectionate expressions had been employed, was fain to be content.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE BEACH.

TO walk on the beach is a simple sea-side recreation which, in different localities, means something very various. At Brighton or Scarborough, such a stroll may be diversified and enlivened by the crack of whips and roll of wheels over sand or shingle, the music of organ-boys and grotesque Ethiopians, and the solicitations of mercenary boatmen to have a "splendid sail," or to woo sea-sickness in a more

seductive form by the intellectual pursuit of whiting-fishing. Elsewhere, a dabbler in the ologies may fill books with weed, or store a can with crabs and molluscs for future transfer to the aquarium or the object-glass of the microscope. But, at Treport, the solitary strip of beach, if sought at all, had to be chosen out for its own sake.

Maud Stanhope was walking on the beach alone. There was little or no risk in being thus unprotected, for in Cornwall, as in America, a lady who is quite alone is as safe from molestation as Una attended by her lion. And in case of the appearance of greedy snatchers from afar, such as Ghost Nan, or of tramps ready to exchange the beggar's whine for the growl of intimidation, any of the black-bearded giants en-

gaged in tinkering up leaky boats or mending nets on the bank above would have been prompt to hurry to the rescue. So Maud had the gleaming cliffs, and the strip of shingle, and the jutting rocks all to herself, as she walked within a stone's throw of the slumbering sea.

Presently the shingle crackled beneath a man's heavier tread, and Maud, who had been walking deep in thought, lifted her eyes and saw Hugh Ashton standing before her. He raised his cap of course, and she returned his bow, saying :

“ I was surprised to see you, Captain Ashton. I thought you had been still in London.” For Hugh's gallant conduct on the night of the wreck was matter of habitual discussion at Llosthuel Court, as under less pretentious roof-trees, and Maud was

perfectly well aware of the finding of the purple bag, and that Hugh had undertaken a journey to London to restore the documents it had contained to their proprietor, Mr. Dicker.

“I did not stay long, Miss Stanhope,” answered Hugh. “I merely went, as you have perhaps heard, to give back some papers, which it was my good luck to save, to their owner—nothing more.”

He saw that she had been weeping, that the traces of tears were still visible about her beautiful eyes; but he did not dare to ask a question that might have been deemed impertinent, still less to offer consolation. And the knowledge of this imparted somewhat of awkwardness to his manner, which Maud had never noticed before. She did not like him the worse for it, however,

partly divining the cause, and, with a woman's ready tact, began to speak of indifferent subjects—of the shining sea, so calm and peaceful; the varying tints of the cliff-wall, towering so majestically above the narrow strip of pebbly strand; and the contrast between Ocean dressed in smiles and the furious sea of that tempestuous night on which Hugh Ashton had last taken out the *Western Maid* to do her errand of mercy.

“I have not seen you, Captain Ashton, since that night,” said Maud, presently; “but you will believe me when I tell you how, when the news of your going out to the aid of that unfortunate ship reached Llosthuel, and we heard the terrible wind, and the awful sound of the angry sea—awful even there—we quite trembled for

you, and for the brave men who went with you to help."

Again the shingle crackled, but this time under the heels of a dainty pair of varnished boots, for it was Sir Lucius Larpent who, turning the angle of a rock, suddenly entered on the scene. He had an angry spot of red on each cheekbone, such as irritation calls up in some men, and there was anger in his eyes, too.

"Mr. Ashton again, eh?" he said, peevishly, and favouring Hugh with a look of the coolest insolence. "Upon my soul, cousin, I am made to feel myself almost an intruder when, in the course of my rambles, I stumble upon you in company with—— Good morning to you, Mr. Ashton. I did not expect to see you here. You appear to have plenty of time on

your hands; quite the gentleman at large."

"I have time on my hands, it so happens, just now, my vessel being under repairs," answered Hugh, quietly.

"Oh, don't take the trouble to excuse yourself to me. It is my mother whose underling you are, not mine!" said the baronet, coarsely.

"Lucius!" exclaimed Maud; and the reproach in her voice seemed to exasperate her kinsman, who said, more snappishly than before:

"I must request you, Maud, to be good enough to accept my escort home to the Court. It is not seemly that you should be out walking so near my mother's house with this—Mr. Ashton."

"I was not walking with him!" exclaim-

ed Maud, in indignant astonishment. "I met him, as I met you just now, by the merest accident, and stopped to say one word, that is all. Your language is unjust, Lucius!"

"Accident indeed!" muttered the baronet. "There are accidents, cousin, of very frequent occurrence, it appears, and which a little friendly interference ought to prevent. I must ask of you to let me bear you company so far as Llosthuel; indeed I must. My presence may be unwelcome, but it may be serviceable in putting an end to—accidents which repeat themselves so often."

This was a very rude speech, and one which Miss Stanhope, had she been quite calm and collected, would have perceived that Sir Lucius had not the slightest right

to make. He was her cousin, not her uncle or her guardian, and even to a male cousin a young lady surely owes, by the very straitest canons of Mrs. Grundy's unwritten law, no sort of obedience. But she was unaccountably agitated by the baronet's artful insinuation—it did not amount to a direct charge—that she had visited the beach for the purpose of meeting Hugh, and she forgot to resent this usurpation of authority on the part of her kinsman.

Hugh did what, perhaps, was the very wisest thing he could have done under the circumstances of the case. The hot blood rose mantling in his cheeks, and his lip quivered; but he kept the rising anger down, and bore the baronet's almost open

insults with Spartan patience. There was evidently nothing which would have better suited Sir Lucius than a quarrel, which Maud Stanhope's presence must of necessity confine within the limits of a verbal encounter, between the young captain of the *Western Maid* and himself. Such an altercation must result in closing the doors of Llosthuel Court against the promoted fisherman, and might bring about the total withdrawal of Lady Larpent's favour from her former protégé. As it was, Hugh Ashton silently raised his cap, made a low salutation to Miss Stanhope, and walked away.

“I never was so sorely tried before,” he murmured to himself, as he scaled the bank, and gained the coast-road that led into the town, “never so sorely tempted, as when

yonder coxcomb made me the butt of his ill-humour. And, to remember that one word from me——”

He said no more; but a deeper shade came over his brow, and he went upon his way without further soliloquy. Meanwhile Maud Stanhope, escorted by Sir Lucius, was slowly walking back towards Llosthuel, and the baronet was doing his best to improve the opportunity of pressing his suit upon his beautiful kinswoman. It might seem at first sight a difficult and awkward task, that of passing from the character of the reprobate relative to that of the enamoured admirer; but Sir Lucius, whose effrontery was equal to the assumption of almost any part, neither felt nor exhibited the slightest embarrassment at the abruptness of the transition.

“It is because I love you so, dearest Maud,” he said, with an easy assurance which gave him almost an air of sincerity, “that it maddens me to think that you could stoop, out of pure thoughtlessness, I am sure, to encourage the impertinent advances of such a fellow as that—not fit to black my boots, by Jove—and——”

“Stop, Lucius, or you will say what you will be sorry for afterwards, and which I can never forgive!” said Maud, interrupting her cousin in a voice that trembled indeed, but not with fear. The insulting imputation which her kinsman had let fall had stung her to the quick; and Sir Lucius, who felt that he had made a mistake, was prompt in rectifying it.

“I beg pardon,” he said, with well-acted humility—“beg your pardon, Maud, with

all my heart, I am sure. Yes, I forgot myself. I was rude to you unwittingly, in my very anxiety to shield you from—— But I cannot trust myself to speak of that fisher-fellow. The very thought of his vulgar presumption makes my blood boil!"

"Sir Lucius," said Maud, coldly, "you are very much in error or much misinformed respecting the absent person of whom it pleases you to use such bitter words. He has been guilty of neither vulgarity nor presumption. I believe him to be incapable of both. Humble as his station may be, I never saw a truer gentleman."

"After that!" exclaimed Sir Lucius, with a burst of laughter that sound actually good-humoured—"after that, Maud, the

less I say of this amphibious Paladin the better! But come, cousin, do not let us quarrel. If I hurt your feelings, I am sincerely sorry for it. It was only my love for yourself that caused me to lose my temper—not a very good one at any time, I am afraid."

"If it were only that, Lucius!" said Maud, more softly. Women do not always dislike a confession of trifling faults from a man's lips, and will condone much more than we really deserve!

"Well, it *is* only that," replied Sir Lucius. "I am a hot-tempered man by nature, and I have much to worry and vex me. And, Maud dear, there is something anomalous in my position which would try the patience of a better-tempered man. I am a baronet. I'm sure I wish I wasn't one, and that my

father had been content to remain the Honourable Wilfred Beville, and leave me to be simply Lucius Beville. But he took my mother's name and arms—what on earth were the Larpent arms?—and would have a title for both. It costs me dear. Every fellow who would be happy with a shilling wants half-a-crown from me, because I have that ridiculous handle to my name. You might pity me, Maud."

"I do pity you, Lucius; from my heart I do," said Maud Stanhope, in her sweet, gentle way. She had just been afforded a glimpse of her kinsman's inner nature, and, although she was sorry for him, it was as we are sorry for a fly that falls into a milk-jug. He was her cousin, and, as a child, she had clung to the bold boy's hand when games of snapdragon, and so forth, were

going on ; but between her and Sir Lucius there could be no real sympathy. The very hereditary rank which he bemoaned as an injury and an encumbrance, she knew to be dear to him as the apple of his eye. A cheque would make all the difference to him between exultation and despondency. And, knowing this, she could not pity Sir Lucius otherwise than as we extend our compassion to creatures below ourselves in the world's great scale of precedence.

“ Will you not do more than pity me ? Will you love me, will you marry me, Maud ? ” said, or sighed the baronet, as they reached the gravelled carriage-ring, the sun-dial, and the porch of Llosthuel Court.

“ Never, Lucius ! ” answered Miss Stanhope, firmly. “ The sooner this subject

ceases to be mooted between us, the better for both."

There must have been some manliness about Sir Lucius Larpent. Sullenly, but with courteous politeness, he took off his hat, and, without a word, left her. Maud gave one glance as he turned away, and then passed sadly on into the house.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK MILLER.

Far inland, and some eighteen miles, as the crow flies, from Treport and its bay and harbour, lies a region little visited by tourists, to whom indeed it presents scanty attractions, being a lofty and stony table-land, thinly peopled, with no romantic scenery, and, owing to its bleak situation and considerable elevation above the sea, having a climate far colder than that of the extreme south-western coast, beloved of the

myrtle and the scarlet-blossomed oleander. That sterile district could never have been, from an agricultural stand-point, very prosperous ; yet it was once the centre of an industry over which our Plantagenet, and still more our Tudor kings, watched with jealous care, and which had drawn Phœnician barks across the mysterious sea that girdled misty Britain in the grey dawn of history. All around Pen Mawth and its circumjacent moorlands the ground was honeycombed with shafts, adits, and galleries of abandoned mines, opened at all sorts of dates, from the time when Gaul was free and Rome a village of mud-huts, down to the speculative epoch that succeeded the Peace of 1814.

All was over now. The mines, in the working of which it was said generations of

adventurers, lured by the hopes of gain, had spent far more than ever the niggard earth had yielded in return, were closed at last. Wheal Betty and Wheal Fortunatus and Wheal Prosperous, famous in their day for the tin they gave and the copper they promised, had long since been hateful to the ears of London brokers, and could not have been nursed into popularity again by the most fluent of promoters. The pick and shovel had long since ceased to tinkle among gossam and schorl, schist and mica; or the human ants to swarm forth at dusk from those narrow holes that gave access to the upper galleries which tunnelled the hill-side. Emigration had swept off the people, and there were left now but barely the hands that were needed to wrest subsistence from the barren soil.

In the heart of this uninviting tract of country stands its one considerable hill, which in Ireland would take rank as a mountain, and the exact height of which is duly set down in the county hand-books and Engineers' Survey, Pen Mawth. The spelling, so antiquarian purists declare, should be Pen Mauth, and means, in the ancient Cornish tongue, the Hill of Death. There can be no doubt as to the accuracy of the translation, at any rate, since the Norman barons who reared their own castle, the ruined towers of which still stand at the foot of the eminence, called their fortress, and themselves by the name of Montmort. The Montmort family has been extinct long since, the Montmort keep is a nesting-place for owl and jackdaw, and the acres of the fief have been sold and

resold, and parcelled out, as often happens in Cornwall, among a score or two of yeomen. But still the Hill of Death, brown with heather, grey with rocks, rises as old, uncouth in shape, a sullen tarn of peat-stained water near its summit, a noisy brook descending the narrow glen that scores its stony flank the deepest ; and in that glen lies, half hidden by beetling crags that threaten to fall and crush it, the Mawth Mill, solidly built of yore by the feudal barons of Montmort, and which has survived the castle of which it formed an adjunct.

Mill and Miller were well matched. The Mill of Death had borne but a bad name in that country-side ever since those early days when Justice was hard to find, and far to seek, along miry roads and past

flooded fords, and the hard heart and the heavy hand had practically more to do with settling matters of everyday life than had the judges of Our Lord the King who came to hold assize in Exeter. There were stories yet current around cottage hearths of cruel vengeance exercised against vassals who had refused to have their corn ground at the lord's mill, or who had boggled at the toll levied by the lord's miller. And the present occupant of the mill—although he had no unscrupulous archers or roistering men-at-arms to back him in wrong-doing, as when the black and silver banner of Montmort waved, threatening, over the battlements of the now dilapidated castle—was yet the terror of the neighbourhood for miles round.

Ralph Swart—such was the name by

which it pleased him to be called—was no Cornishman born, though long a dweller in the district. He had taken the mill on lease from the London Hospital—hospitals grant leases on easy terms—to which it had come to belong, had repaired it, and put it in working order. People called him the Black Miller, most likely on account of his complexion, which was strangely dark; perhaps also on account of the gloomy aspect of the old masonry and timber, darkened by age until the oak resembled ebony, of which his mill was constructed.

Well known at every market for miles around was the Black Miller. Keen and hard at a bargain, never seeming to lack the ready cash wherewith to seal and clench it, he bought grain, when a profit could be made by buying it, to a much

larger extent than the mere needs of his mill demanded. And, curiously enough, though the man was regarded with fear and aversion, more grist came to his grindstones in the legitimate way of business than to those of pleasant-spoken competitors who had a merry look and a kind word for all customers. "Mustn't anger Master Swart!" was said in many a homestead, when it was a question of what should be done with the good wheat in the granary; and it might have been thought that some shadow of the feudal privilege departed yet clung to the Black Miller and his ill-omened abode, so faithful was the patronage of those who dealt with him.

It has been mentioned that Ralph Swart was the terror of the neighbourhood. He

was well qualified to keep up such a character. Fierce and forbidding of aspect, morose and churlish of manners, his herculean strength and savage temper made him doubly formidable. There had been those who disputed his right, tacitly acknowledged by most, to have the lion's share in every bargain, and they had generally had the worst of it in law proceedings, and always in a personal encounter. But very few, after a second glance at the mould in which the Black Miller was cast, would have cared to measure themselves against him.

Ralph Swart lived all alone. A farming-man from the village came up daily to tend his horse and small garden, and to do such rough housekeeping tasks as the Black Miller required and permitted. When

evening came, this man was carefully locked and bolted out of the house, and trudged home, nothing loath, to his own cottage at some distance. No wages would have tempted any native of the hamlet to sleep beneath the roof of the Black Miller. It was not only that the master of the house was an object of fear and dislike, but that the house itself was reputed to be haunted. A pale face, it was said, was seen on moonlight nights peering from the upper windows, all cobwebbed and begrimed with dust—a woman's face, the gossips said below their breath. Yet no woman dwelt there. The Black Miller's wife slept sound, poor thing, in Tregunnow churchyard. She had died, years and years ago, of a broken heart—so rumour told. Ralph Swart had had a daughter, but he had driven her forth from

his doors when she was sixteen ; and where the poor scared child had wandered to, or whether she were alive or dead, none knew.

See him, as he comes now, slowly riding, with a slack rein and a thoughtful brow, up the rocky road that leads to his mill. At a glance it can be seen that the alarm which he inspires, and in which he takes a perverse pride, is well warranted. He is not tall, certainly, but rather resembles a giant cut short; yet, if only of middle height, the vast breadth of chest and the great strength of the limbs render him more than a match for any chance customer. He rides ungracefully, as he does everything, indeed, but so firmly that the most vicious horse cannot unseat him. The lean, well-bred, ill-groomed steed he rides

is vicious, and was bought cheaply at the Tregunnow fair on that account. A vicious horse is apt to have sound legs and a game spirit, and to be sold at a low price, and the Black Miller has a preference for vicious horses.

As the man rides on, defiant even now that there is none to look at him, now that he is climbing the steep path which leads up his own ghostly ravine, towards his own melancholy home, it must be owned that there is a rugged grandeur about him, as there is about the shaggy, red-eyed bison and the grisly bear.

Ugly enough he is; but that high forehead ought to have brains behind it, as surely as that tremendous jaw bespeaks tenacity of purpose. The swarthy skin is darker and more sallow than that of a

Spaniard or Neapolitan, and the eyes, though small, are as piercing as those of a bird of prey. The man is close shaven. You see the blue stubbly mark of his steel-hard beard quite distinctly, just as you see his iron-grey hair that age cannot as yet turn to silver.

He is not slovenly, in farmer fashion, as to his clothes, and wears high black boots that reach the knee, and spurs which have no sinecure, as his horse's bleeding sides attest. Slowly he rides on, deep in thought, a bold bad man, unless Lavater's science and the voice of fame be alike untrue, but one shrewd enough to avoid certain unpleasant contingencies, and to keep to windward of the law.

Ralph Swart, thus riding homeward, his wiry horse picking its way well among the

loose stones and shale that strewed the ill-kept road, would have presented, had anyone with competent intelligence been there to watch him, a curious social puzzle. He was rough in word and deed, repulsive to look upon, hateful in every relation of life; yet it was impossible not to recognize a certain power and originality about the man.

The very fact that he was neat as to his clothes and person, leading the queer life he did, like a volunteer Robinson Crusoe, spoke well for his strength of purpose. To lapse into squalor and eccentric negligence of costume is for the solitary so easy a descent into Avernus that the recluse who conforms outwardly to the fashions of the world shows some merit *per se*. And the few educated persons who had conversed

with the Black Miller were compelled to own that Mr. Swart was something more than the mere sharp-witted rustic that he appeared. The undefinable freemasonry which exists among the cultured aroused in the minds of parson and doctor a suspicion that the Black Miller had more book-lore than falls to the lot of those who live by the hopper and the mill-wheel.

As he jogged on, Ralph Swart drew from an inner pocket of his coat three or four old letters, tied together with string, and all of which, save one, bore postmarks that did not indicate any place in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. He drew forth first one and then another of these epistles, stained and tattered with frequent handling, and glanced them over, quickly but not hastily, and then replaced

them within the belt of string. Then he put up the packet again, saying to himself, in a harsh, grating voice :

“ Ay, ay ! that would be about his age now ; and like his father—yes ! I’d pick him out then, among a thousand ; and if what they said of him out there be true——”

He paused a little, as if in doubt, and then, drawing from another pocket a hunting-flask, unscrewed the top, and swallowed a draught of the fiery spirit which it contained. Then he replaced the flask in his pocket.

“ Ho, ho ! let him try,” he exclaimed, boastfully. “ Old Ralph Swart—Ralph Swart—ha, ha !—is a tough nut for a strippling to crack. Let him try, if he can. I was fool enough, for a day, to be scared

when first that gipsy hag told me that *he* was so near—it did seem as if Providence—— But enough of that. Ho, ho! let him try."

He rode on in silence now, and, dismounting at his own door, relieved his troubled mind in hearty curses on his serving-man, who was used to his moods, and cared little when strong measures did not follow the strong language; and then leaving his tired horse to be led to the shed that did duty for a stable, and receiving the comfortable assurance that the place was "redded up," and the pork and greens boiling for his dinner, walked heavily into the cheerless dwelling-place, and closed the door behind him with a bang.

CHAPTER IV.

RALPH SWART'S HOME.

THE large apartment, kitchen, or house-place, which occupied nearly the whole of the ground-floor of the Black Miller's dwelling, had originally been divided by a wooden partition into two rooms of unequal size. But one half of the partition had been roughly hewn away, to serve for firewood, it might be conjectured, by the splintered condition of such scraps of planking as still clung to the discoloured wall;

while the door had been wrenched from its hinges, perhaps to be utilized in a similar way. The ceiling was dark with smoke and green with damp; and the floor consisted partly of brick, and partly of boards, to whose grimy surface the wholesome friction of soap and scrubbing-brush was unknown. Two or three tables, a battered dresser, a scanty supply of crockery and kitchen utensils, a plate-rack, and a few rush-bottomed chairs and wooden stools, completed the furniture of this uninviting interior.

On a moveable hook, above the fire of mingled peat and coal, swung the iron pot wherein the dinner of the master of the house was cooking. And in front of the fire, basking in the welcome warmth, and fixing hungry eyes upon the iron vessel whence proceeded hissing sounds and the

steam of hot meat, had been, when the Black Miller entered, a lean cat, which slunk away like a guilty thing, when it recognized its amiable proprietor, into a dismal back kitchen that led into a yet more dismal back yard. On a round table, undecorated by any cloth, stood two blue willow-pattern plates, a deep dish of coarse yellow earthenware, a jug, a mug, and a black-handled knife and fork, and long spoon of tarnished pewter. There were also the luxuries, in cracked teacups, of salt and mustard, in the way of preparations for the Black Miller's mid-day meal.

Ralph Swart, as he stood, booted and spurred, his broad-brimmed napless hat pulled down over his massive brows, and his loaded horse-whip still in his ungloved

hand, every finger of which, like the paws of a bear, was hairy almost to the nail, amidst his hideous Lares and Penates, might at first sight have been taken for some grim survival of the grand old Puritan type. It would have been easy to imagine him, in sad-coloured raiment and falling bands, busy among the fierce zealots employed in chopping down Maypoles, smashing the painted windows of cathedrals, and burning witches. But one glance at his keen cruel eye—the eye, as has been already mentioned, of a bird of prey, by turns dull and piercing, but never softening, as human eyes should do, under the influence of human sympathy—would have dispelled the idea.

The Black Miller's first act, on entering his cheerless abode, had been to lock and bolt the outer door—a door of sound oak,

clamped with iron on the inside, and provided with more and stronger fastenings—bar, and bolt, and chain—than are commonly seen in a farmhouse. His next, after a brief survey of the familiar objects around him, was to draw near to the smoky fire, and, with a long trident-shaped iron fork that hung on a nail beside a rusty ladle, to test the degree of tenderness to which the contents of the steaming iron pot had attained in the course of their preparation. Apparently he was satisfied with the result; for his next act was to unlock a cupboard and to take out from it some cheese and the remains of a loaf, as well as a stoneware bottle, tightly corked. Then he flung, rather than placed, the boiled pork and greens within the dish of yellow earthenware, laid aside his hat, and drawing, or

rather dragging, one of the rush-bottomed chairs nearer to the table, began his meal.

There are diners and diners, as there are dinners and dinners. Ralph Swart ate like a wolf, wolfishly. There are men who, dining alone, which few of us care to do, eat carelessly or coarsely, and others who, in solitude, are nice about the niceties of table etiquette, and eat as though they were stage banqueters feasting in presence of a critical audience. But the savage master of the Mill of Death seemed to take a perverse pleasure in the barbaric simplicity of his rude repast. He was hungry after his early hours and his long ride, and he seemed never weary of devouring pork and cabbage. He was thirsty too. The jug held water, and the stone bottle, gin. He

mixed the two liquids together with a careless hand—a little more, a little less—what mattered it to the robust constitution and the seasoned head of the Black Miller! He drank, and freely; but the liquor had no apparent effect on nerves or brain. Then, as he replaced the cork in the stoneware bottle, and surveyed the table equipage, and the scraps of meat in the yellow dish, he laughed hoarsely as he said :

“Lucullus dines with Lucullus! I forget my Juvenal now—Martial too; but there is something Roman, after all, about my simple fare. The masters of the world loved pork—not in this shape though, I fancy, and they drank Falernian, where I drink—gin.”

At this moment the lean cat, stimulated

by the clatter of knife and fork, and rendered hungrier by the scent of meat, thrust its anxious head past the door-jamb of the back-kitchen, and mewed appealingly.

“Be off, you brute!” thundered the Black Miller, making a feint of hurling the stoneware bottle at the feline suppliant, and again the cat slunk off like a guilty thing. Then Ralph Swart filled and lit a pipe, which he took from the broad, wooden, kitchen mantel-piece, and for a brief space was lost in the curling smoke-wreaths and meditative joys of the strongest shag tobacco. After a time he rose, knocked out the ashes of his pipe, and heedfully replaced the pipe itself in its former position; then, locking up the stoneware bottle and the remains

of his meal, he went upstairs, his steel spurs clanking on the bare boards at every step.

The Black Miller's bed-room was by no means what such a person's sleeping-apartment might be expected to be. We are all, however, inconsistent, perhaps happily so, and Ralph Swart's chamber presented some evidences of civilization that seemed strangely out of place in that gaunt, ill-omened house. The floor was carpeted. The brass bedstead and bedding were clean and trim. The furniture was old but good, of walnut chiefly; there were shelves on which stood some thirty volumes, old as to their shabby bindings, and dusty as to their neglected leaves, but neatly ranged in rows; the brushes and razors on the massy dressing-table of black oak were plain

enough, but in good condition. On the chimney-piece stood, between two tall pewter candlesticks, an alarm clock, loud enough to have broken the rest of the Seven Sleepers.

One other object hung on brass hooks above the chimney-piece. It was a gun. Now, that a farmer or miller should have a gun in his house is the merest matter of course; but it is seldom that the firearm in question is so handsome a weapon as that one, with its barrels of damascened steel, and stock of well-carved and highly-polished wood, suspended above the Black Miller's fireless grate. There was a silver plate let into the stock, which once, perhaps, had borne the inscription of a name. But, if so, the file had effectually obliterated the letters of the name.

Ralph Swart took down the gun—it was a breechloader—and examined the cartridges—for the piece was loaded—with the nicest care. Then he replaced them in their chambers, reclosed the mechanism, and hung up the gun again upon its brass hooks.

“This was a novelty, then!” muttered the Black Miller. “How little the old fool knew——”

He said no more, but, turning away, opened a bureau or escritoire in dark wood, with a key of curious and delicate make, which he took from an inner pocket.

The sight which met the eyes of the Black Miller was that of several bundles of papers tied with red tape, as in a lawyer’s

office; and certain ledgers and day-books methodically piled, from which Ralph Swart, after a careful study of the lettering on their marbled backs, selected one, undid the brass clasps, and opened the volume.

Now there is no reason of course why a rustic miller, like any other trader in town or country, should not be punctilious as to his accounts, and accurate as to his memoranda. But very few men of the mill, whether that mill turn out flour, or yarn, or long-cloth, or carpetings, would trouble themselves to keep such books as those of the Black Miller, carefully indexed, tabulated, and compiled with a patient ingenuity that would have been creditable to a prefect of police. Turning over the

leaves, Ralph Swart read attentively numerous paragraphs, written in a clerkly hand, and giving marginal references to documents regularly registered. Then, with something between a laugh and a groan, he reclosed the volume, and locked it up once more in the bureau.

“Posted up!” said the Black Miller, sneeringly—“posted up to the last available moment. No general should neglect the Intelligence Department.” He said no more; but pushing the piece of furniture aside—no easy task, even for him, on account of its bulk and weight—satisfied himself that a blackened cobweb, which chance or design had placed across a scarcely perceptible keyhole belonging to some closet or cupboard in the wall, remained in precisely its former position.

But at that instant the smothered sound of a loud and continuous knocking re-echoed from below.

"Ah! At last, then!" muttered Ralph Swart, a sickly pallor coming over his dark face. "At last!"

Then he pushed back the heavy bureau as if it had been but a featherweight, and with despair written in his countenance walked slowly, but with no faltering tread, step by step down the narrow and creaking stairs. The knocking had been manifestly at the front door. The Black Miller went scowling down, resolute, but with the stubborn resolution of one who for years has expected the worst, and now fears that the worst has come.

CHAPTER V.

A SUDDEN JOURNEY.

SIR LUCIUS LARPENT, after he left Maud at the door of Llosthuel Court, sauntered off in a condition of offended dignity. He played his part pretty well, although an irate lover ought, according to the traditions of the stage, to stalk, and not to saunter, so long as his fair kinswoman was in sight. Then he lit a cigar, strolled round to the stables, and relieved his hurt spirit by telling the deferential

head-groom that his mother's grey carriage-horses, and bay carriage-horses, and the cob, and the pony, and the hack, were a set of heavy-heeled, clumsy, greasy-fetlocked animals, fit to plough, • perhaps, or to drag a butcher's cart, but simply a disgrace to the stable in which they were harboured, and to the lazy duffers who pretended to rub them down. Having said which, with sundry expletives, he flung away his cigar, and rambled off to the house and his own rooms.

Sir Lucius's comforts had been studied at Llosthuel as those of few sons, without “encumbrances,” are ; and it was in a deep arm-chair, before a crisply blazing fire, in the snuggest of apartments, hung round with rods and guns and trophies of the chase, that the baronet pondered, amidst

the fragrant fumes of Turkish tobacco, on the next step that it behoved him to take.

“That fisherman fellow,” he said at length, through half-closed lips, as the blue curls of smoke soared upwards: “I must get rid of him somehow. He’s just the fellow—confound him!—to seem romantic, and gallant, and interesting—in the eyes of a girl. If it wasn’t for her money—or rather for her land—” Then came a pause. “A man must marry, I suppose, sooner or later—ay, more than once, if necessary,” he continued, almost argumentatively; “and, where there is so much to be got by it, I should say sooner. But the fisherman fellow! I must get him put out in the cold one way or other. He has the Fiend’s own luck, always showing up in

some picturesque fashion ! It's not safe to have a beggar who looks like the 'Banished Lord' in old Sir Joshua's picture, always dangling about one's *fiancée*—especially when, as he pretends, he once saved her' life. Let us see !"

Sir Lucius took counsel of the fumes of Turkish tobacco and of the glowing caverns in the brisk coal fire, and presently exclaimed, with a start in his chair :

"Think I've got it ! Think I have ! Sam, my groom of last year—and Sam, I should hope, is in the Penitentiary by this, only that so clever a scoundrel is sure of a ticket-of-leave—told me all about the buyer of my bay horse, Highland Fling, that I sent over to be sold for what the beast would fetch at Tregunnow Fair. A chap they call Swart bought him—Swart,

or the Black Miller of Pen-something. 'Highland Fling won't kick *him* out of the saddle, Sir Lucius,' said Sam; as, indeed, the brute had done to Sam and self only 'too often. And he told me, too, what he'd heard in the public-house about this man Swart, and how, town-bred as he was, Swart was able to buy him at one price and sell him at another, as it were. 'I felt, sir, as if he were the Londoner, and I the bumpkin,' said Sam. This Swart, it seems to me, is the very fellow I'm looking for."

And Sir Lucius presently dressed, and went down to dinner on excellent terms with himself and with the world, so convinced was he that in the person of Ralph Swart he had chanced upon a villain of an exceptionally dark dye and quick intelli-

gence, no doubt amenable, as villains should be, to the persuasions of pounds, shillings, and pence. And Sir Lucius was no longer without the means to pay its just and marketable price for convenient rascality. He was no longer impecunious. His mother, perhaps by way of bounty, and perhaps by way of smart-money in the affair of his thorny courtship, had given him a cheque for a hundred and fifty pounds. He could afford to spend part of it in getting rid of the detested fisherman, whom his mother's incomprehensible infatuation about a mere boatman, who had done an act of mere pluck, had enabled to be a stumbling-block in his path.

The next morning Sir Lucius had slipped out of the house at an hour for him preposterously early, leaving word with his

demure valet, who did not in the least respect or believe his master, but who repeated his words to the echo, and with the earnestness of conviction, that he had gone to see about some shooting. Now shooting is, in the opinion of ladies, an inexplicable but traditionary amusement, for the sake of which gentlemen will go anywhere or do anything, and therefore Sir Lucius felt tolerably certain that the Dowager would easily accept this excuse for his prompt journey from Llosthuel Court.

It was but a slow train that stopped at Tregunnow station, one at which none but slow trains ever did stop, and which had first been built for the convenience of its contiguity to mines, not as yet exhausted or abandoned in sheer despair, hard by. And Treport itself is not, as we are already

aware, on a railway. Sir Lucius had nearly an hour's drive in a pair-horse fly from the "Rose and Crown" before he reached the nearest point whence he could be conveyed by train to Tregunnow. And very weary did his impatient spirit find it, when at length the slow little caravan came meekly up to the draughty platform, where he stood awaiting it, that quiet crawl to the place for which he had taken his ticket.

It quite contradicted his previous notions of railway travel. His recollections were all of the rushing express, the obsequious porters and accommodating guard, the snug corner-seat secured by a judicious fee, the sliding off of the train from the concrete platform, as if impelled by smoothly-acting clockwork, and then the thunder and snorting breath of the steam-horse once fairly on

his mettle. But this was dreadful, this sojourn alone in a mildewed first-class carriage that smelt as damp and looked as cheerful as a family vault, this pottering pace, these eternal stoppages at absurd little holes of places to which nobody could, by any possibility, want to go; and it was a relief indeed when Tregunnow was reached.

“Boy!” said Sir Lucius, addressing himself to one of a group of urchins playing the world-old game which the Romans called Pallus, and we style hop-scotch, outside the paling of the miserable little station; “I want to be shown the way to one Swart’s—Mr. Swart’s—a miller, I believe—near here. And I’ll give you half-a-crown for your trouble.”

The boys all touched their caps, and

stared somewhat blankly at one another. Had they been boys born east of the Celtic far western counties, they would have sniggled mutually ; but, as it was, they were quite serious.

“ Muster Swart !” said the one specially addressed.

“ The Black Miller—up at Pen Mawth !” said another.

There was no great anxiety, even for the guerdon of two-and-sixpence, among the urchins, to go near an ogre’s castle such as the Mill of Death, garrisoned by such a master as the Black Miller. There was, among the juvenile population of Tregunnow, a superstitious aversion to the place, fostered by, but independent of, the sentiments which Mr. Ralph Swart’s reputation inspired. Still it was broad daylight, and

half-a-crown has subtle temptations for those who fare, like Lazarus, wretchedly every day, and know the difference which five unexpected sixpences would make in the resources of the commissariat.

“I'll go, sir!” said the eldest of the hop-scotch players; and, under the guidance of this boy, Sir Lucius set out.

It was not a long walk that lay before the baronet; but all roads that are travelled for the first time are apt to appear interminable to an impatient spirit, and, at any rate, the way was rough, the country wild and bleak, and the weather disagreeable. There was a chilly breeze, damp as well as cold, that swept over the uplands, and the brooding clouds that overshadowed the earth seemed fraught with more than a shower. Sir Lucius, as he picked his way

amidst the stones and ruts, muttered anything rather than complimentary comments on Cornwall, the climate, and the general aspect of the mining district in which he found himself. He was young and agile, and should have made nothing of such a walk from Tregunnow Station to Pen Mawth ; but he did make much of it. He hated walking. With a gun, and in the company of sportsmen superior to himself in rank and fortune, pedestrian exercise was at the worst an endurable evil, but, under existing circumstances, it was odious.

“ What do you call that hill, boy ? ” he demanded tartly of his young guide.

“ Pen Mawth, sir,” was the answer, somewhat deprecatingly uttered, for all manner of weird stories were yet believed

as to the gloomy mountain which bore a name so ominous.

“And what does that mean in your Cornish jargon, or does it mean anything?” asked Sir Lucius; but he did not get any reply. On he walked, nearer and nearer to the Hill of Death. He caught a glimpse of the ruined castle of the Montmorts just before he entered the glen near the head of which the mill stood. The country around him had a sad and solitary aspect. A few sheep—raw-boned, unimproved specimens of the ovine genus, such as Boadicea may have owned, and which seemed to unite the possession of the maximum of bone to that of the minimum of flesh—were cropping whatever they could find among the stubbles on the wind-swept hill-side as he passed. Scarcely a human form was visible, even in

that unfenced region, where the eye could range so far.

Presently the baronet's attention was attracted by the sight of sundry gaping gulfes, and a larger number of tiny holes, some in banks, others in depression of the ground, near which lay, in one or two cases, a heap of boarding and brattice-work and broken windlasses, mouldering away under the long-continued assault of rain and damp, and covered with green mould and buff-coloured fungi.

“Them be the Wheals, master,” said the boy, in answer to an inquiry.

Sir Lucius had been long enough in Cornwall to know what a Wheal meant, and he looked with a careless contempt at the abandoned shafts of mines, of which his grandfather, old Joseph Larpent, would

have spoken with respect, so thriving in his younger days had been the dead-and-gone industry, amidst the wrecks and relics of which the young baronet was now passing.

“Folks don’t care to walk here overly much after dark,” said the young guide, “’cause of the shafts. Easy to go down one of them, if ye miss path.—Here be the Black Miller’s,” he added, as the mill came in view. Sir Lucius felt his flagging spirits revive as he paid and dismissed the boy; and then he knocked long and vigorously at the door of Ralph Swart’s melancholy dwelling.

CHAPTER VI.

DOING BUSINESS.

SIR LUCIUS LARPENT, standing at the Black Miller's door, and knocking impatiently until the noise awoke the sullen echoes of the glen, presently had the satisfaction of hearing the bolts rattle back from their sockets, and the large key turning in the lock. Then the door was opened with a jerk, and the Black Miller himself, gloomy and defiant, stood in the doorway. He started perceptibly as his eyes rested on

the figure of the baronet. Manifestly, it was not such a one as Sir Lucius whom he had expected to see.

“Who, in the name of mischief, are you?” growled the Black Miller.

“Mr. Swart, I presume?” said Sir Lucius, with a slight bow. “Well, Mr. Swart, I have come from a distance—from Treport, in fact, on purpose to speak with you on a matter of—business.”

The Black Miller eyed the young baronet very narrowly from beneath his beetling brows.

“You don’t look much as if you wanted to buy meal, nor yet like a farmer bringing grain to grind,” he said, shortly.

“Perhaps I may bring grist, though of a different kind, to the mill,” responded Sir

Lucius, with a half-careless laugh, but a knowing look.

It was many a year, probably, since any one had ventured to jest with the Black Miller, and for a moment that formidable personage stared at the visitor with the dull anger of a bull disturbed in his pasture, and meditating a charge with lowered horns. He thought better of it, however, and said, sullenly :

“ You may come in.”

And Sir Lucius accepted this gracious invitation to enter; although, a minute later, as he heard the scooping of the rusty bolts, and the clicking of the heavy key as it turned in the lock, he felt anything but satisfaction at the idea that he was shut in, in company with so grim a host.

“And what may your pleasure be with me, young gentleman?” demanded the Black Miller, seating himself on one of the rush-bottomed chairs, and roughly signing to his visitor to take another. “I am a busy man,” he added, “and with me business means business. In the first place, I shall want your name.”

“My name, hey?” returned the baronet. It had not till then suggested itself to his imagination that he should have to reveal his identity to the man on whom he chose to look as a serviceable instrument in his schemes. “Does that signify, so long as I can pay for what I want?”

“It signifies very much to me, young sir,” replied the Black Miller, frowningly. “It has never been my habit to deal with masked customers. I like to see those

who chaffer with me face to face. If our talk is to go any further, I must have your name."

This was very disagreeable, and Sir Lucius felt it to be so. He was not the first employer who has sought for a tool, and then discovered that the implement had too sharp an edge to be handled with impunity. But he had gone too far to recede, so he determined to abandon his incognito as gracefully as he could.

"My name is Larpent; I am Sir Lucius Larpent," he said, haughtily.

"Ah! Sir Lucius Larpent? Yes; there is a look of your grandfather about you, my young gentleman, though you are well enough, and he was as ugly as sin—or as myself," said Ralph Swart, coolly.

"Upon my word, you are a plain

speaker," rejoined the baronet, with a forced laugh. He did not quite know whether it was not incumbent upon him to resent this irreverent description of his ancestor; but the Black Miller was by no means the sort of person with whom it was prudent to quarrel, so he preferred to treat the obnoxious words as harmless. "You seem to know something of my family," he said, cautiously.

"I have seen your grandfather, old Mr. Joseph Larpent. I have seen your mother too, Sir Lucius; and I have heard a good deal of you and yours," replied the Black Miller, weighing, so it seemed, every word. "Folks will talk, you know. The queer thing is, that you should come to me."

"Well, people, as you say yourself, will talk, and I have heard of you too, as having

a shrewd brain and a resolute character," answered Sir Lucius, with affected geniality. "My groom, Sam, who sold you a horse that I daresay he told you was mine, sang your praises pretty loudly as a good judge of horse-flesh and a bold rider."

"Lucky for me that I was!" muttered Ralph Swart, with a grin of self-satisfaction. "You sent that brute to the fair, young gentleman, as careless of whether he broke some greenhorn's neck or not, as some men are of the mischief to result from the bad half-crown they pass away. I've got him still. It takes me two years—three sometimes—to wear out the screws I buy. But you did not come all the way to Pen Mawth to discuss bygone bargains for vicious horses with me, Ralph Swart. What *do* you want?"

“I want,” said Sir Lucius, with an assumed frankness that might have deceived a less profound student of human nature than the grim tenant of the Mill of Death—“I want your advice—your help—in getting rid of a fellow—an impudent adventurer—who has somehow wormed himself into my mother’s good graces, and whom her mistaken kindness has foisted into a position, in our own neighbourhood too, a great deal too good for him. A more presuming beggar,” added the baronet, waxing warm as the catalogue of Hugh’s offences forced itself upon his mind, “I never had the ill-luck to meet with.”

“And who may the presuming beggar be? and what has he done?” asked the Black Miller, curtly. “When you go to a doctor, you know, you must tell him

the symptoms, if you hope for a cure."

"Well," rejoined Sir Lucius, rattling the gold charms that tinkled on his watch-guard, "there is no great mystery about the beginning of the affair. The fellow I speak of was a fisherman—a beggarly boatman, beside a Welsh lake, who let out pleasure-boats for hire. My two young brothers and a young lady, a cousin of ours, went for a sail, and the boat was upset—all through the confounded carelessness of the elder boatman, Ashton, who——"

"Ashton!"

The Black Miller could not repress the exclamation, though he bit his lip afterwards, as if vexed with himself.

"Heard the story, then?" inquired Sir Lucius. "There's a deal of gossip about, and most likely it has reached your ears that

old Ashton was drowned—and serve him right, since it was all his fault from the first—and that the younger of the scoundrels made believe to save Maud's—I mean my cousin, Miss Stanhope's life. My mother took, as ladies will, you know, a romantic view of the situation, and—and——”

“I think I know the rest,” said the Black Miller, briefly. “Lady Larpent, who can do pretty much as she likes, Treport way, gave the young man a steamer to command, or got him appointed, which is the same thing, I take it. All this, of course, is known to all who lend an ear to common gossip. Rumour, in the days of the Elizabethan stage, was painted ‘full of tongues,’ and very sensibly.”

“Holloa!” exclaimed the baronet. He

was not himself very well read, or much of a bookworm ; but he had not been able to escape some touch of culture, and the notion that the savage recluse before him was an educated man came upon him as a startling revelation. He looked more closely than before at Ralph Swart, and, as he looked, there started up in his mind the wild fancy that he had seen the man himself long ago. The voice of the Black Miller recalled him from this apparently groundless reverie.

“All this time, Sir Lucius,” he said, “you have not come to the point, or told me what you wish me to do, or why you are so anxious to be rid of this youngster. Is it because of Miss Maud Stanhope ?”

Sir Lucius winced, and a little colour rose to his sallow cheek ; but he put the

best face possible on the matter, and glibly enough admitted that the Black Miller's conjecture was not wide of the mark. Miss Stanhope was of a generous, and perhaps sentimental disposition—so her kinsman said—and it was well to remove from the neighbourhood an artful and intriguing upstart like that fisherman fellow. Could Mr. Swart, who was justly reputed the longest-headed man in West Cornwall, contrive to make Treport too hot to hold Hugh Ashton? “If so —”

“I don’t work gratis!” interrupted the Black Miller, drily.

For this the baronet was prepared; and he said so. A hundred pounds were at Mr. Swart’s disposal, could he but see his way to the successful completion of the business in hand.

“Half down, half when the job is finished?” asked the Black Miller, as if he had been speaking of the most common-place of transactions.

“Certainly! Half to be paid in advance,” rejoined Sir Lucius, jingling a number of sovereigns that he carried in his pocket. The Black Miller’s eyes glowed like carbuncles.

“Then tell down the fifty yellowboys on this table!” he said, decisively, slapping down his heavy hand upon the table in question with an energy that startled the baronet; “and while you count them, I will tell you, Sir Lucius, that you’ve come to the right shop. I hate the young chap —never mind why—and I know, perhaps, a thing or two about his past life—but never mind what! You leave it all to me.

The *Western Maid* will have a new captain pretty soon. You leave it all to me!"

No explanation could be drawn from Ralph Swart; but the ferocious confidence with which the man spoke, and the earnestness of his manner, impressed Sir Lucius in spite of himself; and he allowed the Black Miller to sweep up the glittering gold pieces into the hollow of his huge hand, to count them heedfully over, and to deposit them in a weasel-skin purse, carefully secured with a string, which he thrust into an inner pocket.

"Fifty more, by cheque, when Hugh Ashton makes tracks?" said the Black Miller.

"Certainly," said Sir Lucius; "but——"
"Leave it all to me!" returned the other,

authoritatively. “Is it a bargain? Well then, done!” And he held out his hand. By birth and tradition Sir Lucius Larpent was a gentleman, and he hesitated to put his hand into that of the ruffian before him. The Black Miller noted this, and scowled darkly.

Sir Lucius took the proffered hand. “Done, then!” he said, with feigned heartiness.

The Black Miller wrung the baronet’s white fingers in a grip so hard that the rings bruised the flesh, then let the hand drop.

“You shall hear news of me, young gentleman,” he said; and Sir Lucius gladly took his leave, and seemed to breathe more freely when the bolts were withdrawn and the door opened, and he was out once

more in the free air, and on his way to Tregunnow. As he descended the glen he looked back, and saw the darkling figure of the Black Miller standing at his door, as though watching him; but a few steps more and he was out of sight. Through rain and mire he made his solitary way back to the station, and after a few minutes saw the welcome train that was to bear him homewards, come panting down the line. He reached Llosthuel Court in time for a late dinner, and without having aroused any suspicions as to the nature of his errand.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD LORD PENRITH.

STRANGERS in Dorsetshire, and especially in that part of Dorsetshire which marches, to use the old Border phrase, with the New Forest district of Hampshire, not seldom hear, from the lips of natives jealous of the honour of their county, “Ah! but you should see Alfringham!” And Alfringham, which, as the *Peerage* duly registers, is the seat of Lord Penrith, is a place worth seeing, spreading as it does

its stately frontage of brown stone and brick mellowed by time over an immense extent of ground, and surrounded as it is by a park full of giant oaks and beeches sacred from the axe. There is in this park one glorious vista, where the eye ranges far over swelling uplands clothed with the elastic turf, over which the dappled deer have roamed unharmed for many a century, until its view is bounded by what seems in the distance to be a high green rampart, but which residents in the neighbourhood know to be the belt of tall trees that marks the actual boundary of the Royal Forest amidst whose glades the Red King rode to his death.

A grand old place is Alfringham. Severe social moralists, who, in the course of a summer tour, come to contemplate its

antique towers, its priceless pictures, its wealth of rooms unused, its more than baronial pomp, and space, and splendour, have been known to aver spleenfully that no single family had the right to build for itself a dwelling so enormous. But no single family would have dreamed of piling up all those bricks and all those stones, with acres of sheet-lead to coat the glistening roofs, and turrets innumerable, and winding stairs, and passages that turn and twist, and hall within hall, on one original plan. Alfringham, like Topsy, "growed," and remains, like our own constitution of Monarch, Lords, and Commons, a magnificent anomaly, not to be imitated by the most potent of legislators. You may trace the site of the Saxon earl's, or Danish jarl's, wooden palace. You can see the moat,

now drained, and full of fair bright-coloured flowers, that guarded the castle of the Norman chief. Generation after generation seems to have added, altered, rebuilt, until the result is the prodigious pile that now meets our eyes, and the burning of which would be a national misfortune, so precious is history written in masonry and timber.

The armorial bearings, the shields and crests and mottoes, so often repeated, in chiselled stone, on the front of that stately old house, are the arms of Beville. And Lord Penrith is the head of the Beville stock, which has produced gallant soldiers, goodly gentlemen, and even a stray statesman or two, ever since the first of the name crossed the narrow seas—not exactly with the Conqueror—but, at any rate, to fight

for Matilda and her boy against Stephen, King and Count. They have borne the baron's coronet so long, have the Bevilles, Lords Penrith, that they are proud of the ancient rank and of the tattered robes that are religiously preserved to be donned on ceremonial occasions, and decline promotion. The old peer, who now bears the title, has twice refused an earldom. His grandfather, in more stirring times, is said to have rejected the strawberry leaves of a fire-new marquisate. But half the earls in the Peerage have not the rent-roll of Lord Penrith.

There is a gloom now about the place, the existence of which the most fanatical of housekeepers, whose pleasantest hours are spent in showing the respected lions of the mansion to sightseers, could not deny. My

lord sees very little company, and sees as little of that select circle of acquaintance as decorum and a sense of the proprieties permit. There is a shadow over the past life of the master of stately Alfringham—a shadow which seems to communicate itself locally to the great house and its demesne. Nobody ever seems to laugh there, to be blithe and joyous, or to relish the honey of the passing hour unalloyed by carking care.

My lord is a man of sense enough to eschew the reputation of a hermit, and, therefore, there are dinners—heavy dinners—at Alfringham, and also visits—heavy visits—paid and received. And the squires and squiresSES, and the baronets and their dames and damsels yawn wearily as they drive away from Alfringham on the moon-

light nights congenial to country hospitality, for at Alfringham sumptuous Dulness reigns supreme.

In the third drawing-room of the great house sits Mrs. Stanhope, the old lord's widowed and favourite, and, indeed, only surviving sister, in conference with the family doctor. Mrs. Stanhope has a marked partiality for that third and smaller drawing-room, on account of its rose-coloured hangings, which she believes to be favourable to her complexion. The faded London fine lady never forgets that her sweet portrait, splendidly engraved on steel, simpers at us yet from the now uncared-for *Book of Beauty*.

A sad number of years have elapsed since D'Orsay and Chesterfield gave laws to Fashion ; but Charlotte Stanhope—

are there any girl-babies christened Charlotte now, as when Werter and his Sorrows were yet remembered?—had never quite given up the struggle against impertinent Time. Although she was the old lord's sister, she would never have forgiven whomsoever should have called her old. She was, in truth, by sundry years Lord Penrith's junior. She was very well preserved. To her maid she may not have been a heroine or a belle; but then somebody must be behind the scenes when a grand pictorial effect has to be produced. Perhaps it was partly because of the disparity of years between them that the old peer was so fond of her.

As a boy, he had been tender with his baby sister, and he had never forsaken her. When she angered her parents by a love-

match, Marmaduke Beville, the Master of Penrith, as they would have called him in Scotland, stood by her, procured her pardon, and, when he came early to his title, paid Colonel Stanhope's debts more than once. Mrs. Stanhope had lived at Alfringham since her widowhood.

There was very little harm, and perhaps not much of positive good, in the Honourable Mrs. Stanhope. She was fond, though, of her daughter Maud, who seemed to her like the reproduction of her own regretted youth, but who was, in truth, by far more beautiful than the once courted belle of Alnack's had been in her best days. And she was fond of her brother, and sincerely afraid of him too, for Lord Penrith was of a masterful will, and then how much lay in his gift! Since the Colonel died (and the

Colonel had merely been one of those vacuous, pleasant-tempered, easy-going men about town, of whom there is a never-failing crop), she had—as she had written with crow-quill pen and on perfumed paper to more than one feminine friend of her own standing—devoted herself wholly to her brother, who was gentler to her than to any human being, gentler even than to Maud his niece.

Mrs. Stanhope was conversing, or perhaps the phrase should rather be conferring, with the family doctor, a country practitioner, and a man of that refined intelligence which we so frequently meet with even in sparsely inhabited agricultural districts. Dr. Bland was really a clever young doctor, who had been for years assistant to the famous, dictatorial, and perhaps slightly

stupid, Orlando Blades, M.R.C.S., of Savile Row, than whom no surgeon pouched more fees or bullied more patients in any consulting-room in all London.

He had saved a little money now, had Peter Bland, and there he was in Alfringham village, with a limited but widening circle of houses whereat to call professionally, medical officer of the Union, and medical adviser to the lord of Alfringham himself. Naturally the doctor thought a good deal of his titled patient, the right to feel whose august pulse implied the privilege of being the most fashionable son of *Æsculapius* for miles and leagues around.

“His lordship was low—very low—to-day. I mean as to his spirits, of course, and the general tone of his health,” remarked the doctor. He had prescribed for

Mrs. Stanhope, who had always some trifling nervous ailment on hand to give employment to the Faculty ; and now the talk turned on general topics. Of these, a very important one was Lord Penrith's health. He was old, and in failing health, and he gave Dr. Bland no sinecure.

"I am afraid my brother *is* ill, and yet he is of a robust constitution ; all the Bevilles were, except my unfortunate self!" sighed Mrs. Stanhope.

The doctor assented.

"Lord Penrith," he said, "must have been by nature a strong man. He leads a quiet life here, in pure country air. But care, or some other cause, counteracts all that I can do."

"Care ! You may well say so," replied Maud's mother. "Is it possible, doctor,

that you are unacquainted with the family history, with the story of the disaster that has darkened my brother's life?"

The doctor may or may not have heard, in a gossiping country neighbourhood, some salient events in the life of the most dignified personage that it contained. But he was a doctor on his promotion, and he manifested so much ignorance, and so much interest on the subject of his noble patient's early experiences, that Mrs. Stanhope willingly went on :

"Lord Penrith is childless now; but he had two sons. The name of the elder was, like his own, Marmaduke Beville; that of the younger, George. The first of these was—murdered!"

"Indeed, Mrs. Stanhope!" said the physician, looking shocked.

“And, what was worse,” resumed the lady, pleased with so attentive a listener, “the murderer was no other than his own brother !”

Dr. Bland very truly remarked that this was horrible.

“Was it certain ?” he asked.

“Too true, I am afraid !” said Mrs. Stanhope, shaking her head. “My nephews—I am, as you are perhaps aware, a good deal younger than Lord Penrith, so that his sons and I were nearly contemporaries—were very dissimilar in tastes and character. Marmaduke was very resolute and quick-tempered. George was retiring and shy. There had been, it was proved, disputes between them. And when, at last, the elder brother was found in a wood, shot through the heart, the weight of

evidence against the younger one was such that, had not George fled the country, nothing could have saved him from a felon's death.

“As it was, he went abroad disgraced, and died—no one knows where—in exile, a very Cain. His father never would mention his name more, nor would he hold any communication with him. He never answered one of the incoherent letters which George wrote from abroad, protesting his innocence of the crime. ‘Let him stand his trial!’ my lord said, and I shall never forget the voice in which the words were uttered. Yet that sorrow all but broke my brother’s heart. He had been so fond and proud of Marmaduke, the heir. And he had loved George, too, more than he cared to own, when he

turned out the wretch he did. He has never been the same man since."

"Was it all circumstantial evidence against Mr. George Beville?" asked the doctor, drawing on his gloves.

"All—or nearly all—but terribly strong!" answered Mrs. Stanhope. "The worst feature of all—so some said—was my unhappy nephew's flight; but, had he remained, no rank or connections could possibly have availed to save him from justice. I fear there can be no doubt that the hand which fired the fatal shot was his."

"And his own death—abroad, I think you said, Mrs. Stanhope?" inquired the doctor. "May I ask if that was proved?"

"Not proved, as deaths, I believe, are

proved in England," answered his fair patient; "that is impossible, I suppose, in the Bush, or whatever they call the dreadful place. But advertisements were inserted for years in all colonial papers, and inquiries made, official and private. There can be no doubt of his death. Poor wretch! It was the happiest thing, after all—saved the disgrace to the family—so shocking if he—— That is my brother's bell, and he has rung twice. I hope they are not neglecting him. You will excuse me, doctor? Then, good-bye!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE JOWDERS.

HUGH ASHTON, at Treport, did not, even during the enforced inactivity of the steamer under his command, find the time hang heavily on his hands. First and foremost, there were the repairs of the *Western Maid* to demand his attention. Strictly speaking, it was no concern of the vessel's captain as to when the vessel, now crippled, would be ready for sea.

Old Captain Peter Cleat, his predecessor in the command, would have chuckled in his sleeve at the convenient delays which enabled him to draw his pay while tranquilly smoking his pipe on shore. But Hugh was no mere hireling, and he hurried on the work of shipwrights and engine-fitters in a manner which, in one of Her Majesty's dockyards, would have been invaluable, so that there seemed every probability that the tug-boat would soon resume her career of useful activity.

One task, less congenial to Hugh's tastes than that of speeding the repairs of his vessel, was forced by circumstances upon the steamer's young commander, that, namely, of weeding his crew of the worst elements that it comprised. A drunken fireman was cashiered. Three seamen also

received their dismissal, and the most notable of these was the late mutineer, Salem Jackson. Hugh was loath to be severe with this man, leniently considering that his bad conduct on the night of the shipwreck had been sufficiently punished by the knock-down blow he had received ; but the mate was obdurate.

“ Pass over that, and worse'll come of it,” said Long Michael, resolutely. “ Must hev an example, for discipline's sake. If you don't report the blackguard, I must, Cap. ; that's all.”

So Salem Jackson was reported to the Board, and, by order of the Board, dismissed, and went scowling away over the gang-plank of the *Western Maid*.

At this time, also, it came to pass that Hugh, perhaps rashly, provoked the un-

dying hostility of a powerful though irregular guild, that of the Jowders or fish-dealers—a very important factor in the simple problem of Cornish coast-life. It stirred the young man's free and generous spirit to see the ignoble vassalage in which so many bronzed seafaring men—fine fellows who seemed to have every good quality but that of mother-wit—were kept by the salesmen, whose illegal combination regulated the market-price of fish. Had this been the Jowders' sole offence, it might have been condoned. Unluckily, these petty capitalists were in the habit of investing a portion of their capital in the pockets of unthrifty fishermen, heedfully secured by certain stringent documents on stamped paper, which gave the lender a lien on boats and nets, goods and gear, and made the debtor

the slave, as a debtor always is, of perhaps as inexorable a variety of the genus creditor as Europe could supply. One branch of business was dexterously made to help the other. It is not easy to dispute the hard terms of a purchaser who, while fixing his own price for cod-fish and skate, and turbot and mackerel, never suffers you to forget that the last half-yearly interest at seventy per cent. is in arrear, and that replevin and seizure and foreclosure, and other ugly terms familiar to the law, are only held in reserve, like greyhounds straining in the leash.

Hugh had spoken his mind once and again, with what was very likely an imprudent frankness, concerning these Jowders, and what would probably have been said of them, and possibly done to them, among

the more independent colonists whom he had known, or in other parts of our own coasts. Why did not the fishermen make a stand, save a bit, help one another in the hour of need, and cease to be borrowers from, and therefore serfs to, the Jowders? Why did they not band together to send their fish direct to market, and so get rid of the middlemen who fattened on their unthrift and helplessness, and whom he likened to a set of Tregeagles?

Hugh's advice did not do much good. The brave, broad-shouldered, simple-hearted giants to whom he spoke took his well-meant words in very good part, but shook their heads, as they puffed at their clay pipes, with a very hopeless air. They were not free fishers, except in name, doubly enthralled as they were by the chains of

habit, not to be snapped in a day, and by the traditionaly bondage to the bloodsuckers who lived on the fruits of their toil and danger.

To anger the Jowders was a very terrible conception to those who knew that all home comforts and the future power of winning a crust for the little ones depended on the non-employment of that awful scrap of stamped paper locked up in some salesman's desk. But the comparison of the money-lending Jowders to the legendary Tregeagle, that unjust steward whose punishment it is to labour hopelessly and for ever with spade and pail among the sands of the sea-shore, seemed to them a better witticism than any that ever had been uttered at the "Mariner's Joy," where wit was rare ; and they repeated the joke, and

told it to their wives, and it was buzzed about from door-step to door-step, until—it was not very long first—it got to the Jowders' ears, and raised a corporate feeling of hate against Hugh Ashton.

Presently, an event occurred which brought matters to a crisis. One day a fisherman's wife, Patience Pennant by name, came weeping to Captain Trawl's house. Could the Captain help her, or the young Captain help her, for the love of God, in her sore need? And in truth the poor thing, with two young children clinging to her skirts, and four others left crying at home beside the fireless hearth, was in great distress. Her story was a short one, and the main facts of it patent to all. Jan Pennant, her husband, had gone through a series of misfortunes. First, he had "took

ill ;" then, when able to go out to the deep-sea fishery, a squall had carried away mast and boom, and much tackle in the wreck of the spars ; and, last and worst, old Mr. Polwhedle of Treport Upper Town, professed salesman and real usurer, regarding luckless Jan as a sponge no longer worth the squeezing, had swooped down upon the debtor's boat and nets, in satisfaction of ninety pounds, principal and interest, then due.

The fishermen, moved by the hardship of the case, had clubbed their resources and made up a purse of twenty pounds. But Jowder Polwhedle would not take the twenty pounds, or grant a respite. Shylock insisted on his bond. It was held essential to the system of terrorism on

which the power of the Jowders was based that a victim should be made now and then. And Jan Pennant had been selected as a very appropriate sacrifice to Mammon. This time Patience Pennant was enabled to dry her tears. Worthy Captain Trawl, who was not of a saving turn, could indeed produce from the recesses of the tea-caddy which served him for a treasury but one five-pound note, crumpled and greasy, which he flattened down with his heavy hand before presenting it to the fisherman's weeping wife. But Hugh Ashton, who had his share of the salvage reward unspent in his possession, produced, to quote Patience Pennant's admiring words, "seventy golden sovereigns," wherewith to pay off old Pol-whedle of Treport Upper Town. And Jan

Pennant, who had been too shame-faced to beg personally for aid, came to render thanks for the loan, beginning in manly words, and then breaking down and sobbing like a big bearded baby before he got to the end of his speech. And it was all that Hugh could do to prevent the surf-booted fishermen, Jan's neighbours and comrades, from carrying the young Captain of the *Western Maid* in triumph on their shoulders into the town. But old Pol-whedle the Jowder was stirred to royal wrath, and his brethren of the craft made common cause with him.

That very evening, as Hugh, in compliance with the pressing invitation of the good simple fellows whose hearts his kindness had won, was present as their guest in the public room of the "Mariner's Joy,"

there was a hum and an uneasy stir among the company nearest to the door, and there came shambling into the room a little lean old man, wearing horn spectacles, and having a huge black pocket-book ostentatiously protruding from the breast-pocket of the loose brown coat he wore. He took off his hat and adjusted his black wig upon his wrinkled brows as he came in ; and, as his small ratlike eyes surveyed the assembly, it was evident that the sight of him produced an effect similar to that of the appearance of a ferret in a rabbit-warren. All those big stalwart fellows in the red shirts and blue suits of Flushing cloth seemed scared at the arrival of this lean little old man.

Hugh was the only person present who did not know the new-comer by sight ; but

he soon learned his name from one of the company, who asked timidly “if Muster Polwhedle would sit down.”

But Mr. Polwhedle the Jowder declined to take the chair that the deferential landlord came bustling to offer. He preferred to stand ; and so, leaning against the door-post, he drew out his large black pocket-book and opened it, and rustled over the leaves, looking about him from time to time, and scanning the face of man after man with a malicious enjoyment of the hush that had fallen upon the company and of the terror which his aspect and that of the black pocket-book occasioned. Had he been a prefect of police, and they a band of continental conspirators, the honest fellows gathered in the “Mariner’s Joy” could not have looked more cowed than they did.

In a few minutes another new-comer, manifestly a friend of Mr. Polwhedle's, dropped in, and then another and another, till the whole of the Jowders in Treport and its vicinity, some six or seven strong, seemed to be collected, like carrion-crows about a carcass, in the public room of that sea-side hostelry.

The Jowders were not all, it may well be supposed, little old men, like Mr. Polwhedle, their patriarch. One or two of them, indeed, might have been his twin brothers, save as regarded the black wig; but others were coarse, burly, red-faced men, in the prime of life, yet still with an odd sort of family likeness about the hard mouth and the restless eyes, that seemed to be heir-looms among them.

In the presence of this awful muster of

Jowders, the fishermen scarcely dared to draw their breath, and an ominous silence prevailed. The silence was broken by old Mr. Polwhedle, who, pointing with a yellow and crooked forefinger at Hugh, as if devoting him to the powers of evil, croaked out :

“ There he sits ! That’s the man ! ”

And there was an inarticulate chorus of suppressed hisses and snarls from the congregated Jowders.

“ Do you mean me, Mr. Polwhedle, if that is your name ? And, if you do mean me, what do you want ? ” demanded Hugh.

“ That’s the man, ” went on Mr. Polwhedle, taking no notice of Hugh’s inquiry, “ that takes upon himself to advise them that be fools enough to hearken to him, to

have nothing to do with us Jowders. That's the man that said, in Australia, I should have been tossed in a blanket long ago. And that's the man that put on us Jowders the nickname of Tregeagles."

Again the same chorus, a little louder and fiercer this time, from the sympathetic fraternity of Jowders. The fishermen, their eyes on the ground, their muscular hands grasping their extinguished pipes, looked as frightened as school-boys in presence of an angry head-master.

"That's the man," pursued Mr. Polwhedle, suddenly directing his crooked forefinger and his baleful gaze towards the unfortunate Jan Pennant, "that borrows cash—or begs it—from a stranger, and an enemy to us Jowders, when he's sold up by his lawful creditor, is it? Very well, Jan Pennant!

Then, when you get a new mast aboard that boat of yourn, and a new boom, the best use you can make of 'em is to set every rag of sail, and be off out of this, to earn your bread where you can. You don't sell another creel of fish in Treport, or near Treport, from now to your dying day, Jan, my lad!"

Then there arose, mingling with and drowning the hoarse chorus of the triumphant Jowders, a chorus on the part of the sea-faring men there present. Not of indignation—not of anger.. No, no! Never before, perhaps, had the threats of a Jowder been so publicly spoken ; but conversation, as we know, between man and man, is not libellous, and the fishermen there had for the most part heard hints, if not menaces, as dire as that freshly uttered.

All that the poor fellows, with their wives and little ones at home, dared to venture was a humble plea *ad misericordiam* on behalf of Jan their comrade. His sentence was one of banishment; and for a Cornishman to leave the church town, the sight of the old church tower, and quay, and pierhead, and gabled houses, is bitter indeed. Even Hugh, when he spoke, after a wondering, sorrowful glance to right and left at the bronzed and black-bearded men, so fearless of storm and sea, so meek in presence of the usurers who took the lion's share of their hard-won gains, spoke, since at last he found himself the only spokesman there, with a mildness that belied the tingling of his warm young blood.

“Mr. Polwhedle,” he said, “think it over! Be as angry as you please with me,

but spare the innocent. Jan Pennant has done you no harm. You wouldn't, surely, forbid an Englishman, in his native place, to earn his honest bread!"

"Wouldn't I?" replied old Polwhedle, with a hideous cackling laugh. The other Jowders echoed the laugh in deeper tones, and then, in a body, the carrion-crows moved off; and the Treport fishermen were not long in following their example. There was no more talk, no more laughter among them; but silently, despondently, each man went home to tell his wife, with bated breath, that it was not good to vex the Jowders, and of Jan Pennant's doom.

CHAPTER IX.

A FRUITLESS SEARCH.

HUGH had plenty to do. There was trouble in the "Rest," as the old skipper called his dwelling, under the roof of which Hugh was a lodger. Old Captain Trawl had himself fallen ill. Sometimes the unsuspected seeds of disease lie for years and years latent in the constitution, like so many grains of Egyptian mummy-wheat waiting, perhaps from the date of the mythic foundation of Rome to the present

year of grace, to sprout when planted and watered, and bear doleful harvest at last. And especially is this apt to be the case when men have spent their best years under such skies as those beneath which the old merchant captain had spent the best of his life, and where fever, and ague, and palsy are easy to catch and hard to heal.

At any rate, old Captain Trawl was ill; and his delicate grandchild Rose would have been unequal to the task of nursing him but for Hugh's help. Hugh Ashton was, like all sailors, a good nurse in sickness, soft of tread and speech and touch, and gifted, too, with that quick sympathy that divines a sufferer's wants, and which is often believed to be a woman's especial prerogative. Strange it is, by the way, that the bravest

men, like the tenderest of women, are the best and most thoughtful beside a couch of pain. No watcher of the night could be more unselfishly patient than Hugh Ashton; and it was wonderful how soothing was the effect that his presence produced on the old invalid seaman, who loved to prattle, when he awoke from snatches of feverish slumber, of the sea.

One other volunteer attendant—other than 'Nezer, the faithful dwarf, whose large feet, and clumsy hands, and heavy tread unfitted him for service in a sick-room—the captain had, though it was very seldom that Will Farleigh had time to spare. Will was pretty Rose Trawl's affianced husband, a light-haired, bright, slight young fellow, the sole support of a bedridden mother, and whom it had not been easy to induce old

Captain Job, who had a traditionary reverence for bone and brawn, to accept as a suitor for his grand-daughter's hand.

Will was a bird-hunter and bird-stuffer, an ornithologist he called himself laughingly, not very strong, but as lithe and active as a lizard when scaling a rock, and reputed the most daring of Cornish crags-men. There are countless birds and rare on those far-western shores—the red-legged chough, the puffin, the osprey, and ducks and gulls of species unknown in many other parts of Britain ; and Will, who was a devourer of books, knew more of their ways, and was defter in stuffing and preserving the specimens that fell in his way, than his illiterate competitors.

Will, like most of those who knew him, had been drawn towards Hugh Ashton, as

such natures as those of the young Captain of the *Western Maid* do attract generous spirits. To Hugh he confided the hopes and fears of a life sufficiently adventurous.

“You see, Captain Ashton,” he would say, “I get my bread by risking my neck. Mine’s a kittle trade, as a North-country stuffer I once worked with—killed, I heard, poor fellow, by a fall from the Antrim cliffs, over in Ireland—used to say. Now, when first I began as a boy, I took a foolish pride in playing pranks, to make folks stare; but when I got more sense, I took the rope with me in awkward places, for mother’s sake more than mine, since, if my foot slipped, there would be nothing for the poor old soul but the Union. And now, on account of Rose, I never throw a chance away when I am over the cliff.”

To Will Farleigh, whose professional wanderings brought him into contact with people of all grades, Hugh mentioned his desire to be informed as to the present whereabouts of Ghost Nan.

“Ghost Nan—Gipsy Nan,” answered Will, with a laugh. “Why she’s here, unless, indeed, she goes on the principle of the old saying, ‘Here to-day, gone to-morrow!’ Anyhow, I saw her, Wednesday evening last, flit, like a bat in the twilight, across the entrance to Holloway. Ten to one she’s at Giles Treloar’s.”

Hugh proceeded to explain to his new friend that it was no easy matter, according to his experience, to pass Mr. Treloar’s inhospitable portals. He had been twice at the door of the tramps’ lodging-house since the memorable day on which the pot-

valiant proprietor of the establishment had refused admission not merely to himself but to the superintendent of the Treport police, and, so far from gleaning any intelligence as to Ghost Nan, had not even been able to obtain the dubious felicity of an interview with the redoubtable Giles himself.

“Whom did you see?” asked Will. “A woman, wasn’t it, with a baby in her arms, and a black eye, and smelling of gin and peppermint?”

Hugh admitted the accuracy of this unflattering portrait.

“That’s Mrs. Treloar—Mercy Judkin that was,” went on the young bird-stuffer. “She was the daughter of a respectable tradesman, up town, and married this scamp Giles; and all her family turned their backs

on her when she came back with him from London, and set up this lodging-house. It's out of pity for her the magistrates don't withdraw the beer license ; and, though she has much to put up with, poor creature, she does her best to go on respectably, and somehow keeps the business, such as it is, together. As for Treloar, he does nothing but drink and bluster, except when he has got the horrors on him ; but, after all, he's master of the house ; and so, if we want to find out about Ghost Nan, we must do it by stratagem."

Young Will went on to say that he, dealing not infrequently for scarce birds or eggs with the moor-ranging vagrants who frequented Mr. Treloar's squalid house of entertainment, was in a manner free of it. What he proposed was that Hugh should

keep out of sight while he entered the place on some plausible pretext of business, and did his best, without exciting suspicion among a most suspicious class of persons, to ascertain whether Ghost or Gipsy Nan were really harboured on the premises.

Hugh's heart beat high as he walked beside the bird-hunter through the narrow and roughly-paved streets of the quaint old town ; but, at the corner of Holloway, Will Farleigh suggested that he should halt and await his return.

“ One glimpse of you, Captain Ashton,” he said, good-humouredly, “ would spoil sport. Me they don't mind ; but you look so like a gentleman that, if they lost money by it—and they'd do pretty nearly anything for money—they couldn't help telling you a pack of lies. Mumps and cadgers

are queer—very queer !” And, with this axiom of practical morality, he went his way ; and after a delay which seemed to Hugh interminable, came back with a shade of disappointment over his bright, boyish face.

“ Bird flown,” he said, shaking his head ; “ and some trouble I had, too, to find out that much. One thing I did learn—she went off this very morning New-Forest way.”

“ New-Forest way—indeed !” answered Hugh, thoughtfully.

“ It’s a great place for gipsies, I have heard,” returned the bird-stuffer, more occupied with his own skill in eliciting the information than with the intrinsic value of the information itself. “ I heard it from

an old chap that makes a living by sham fits—epilepsy, you know—and travels all England to do it. ‘What do you want with Ghost Nan, young shaver?’ says he. But I said she’d got a brace of kittiwakes to sell, that some gipsy boys had knocked down on the cliff with stones, I was told. And he believed it, and said with a chuckle: ‘You may go for your kittiwakes to the New Forest then, my boy, for she’s off thereward since morning.’ And then Treloar came in, very boozy and quarrelsome, and I was glad to get out of the kitchen.”

As Hugh returned home, baffled for the second time by the whimsically sudden disappearance of this wild woman, who held, he could scarcely doubt, a clue to

the mystery which he had made it the business of his life to fathom, he met Jan Pennant.

“I’ve come, Cap., to say good-bye, and may God bless ye for your kindness!” said the fisherman.

“You are not really going on account of that man’s threats?” asked Hugh.

“Yes, I am, Cap’en. I know the Jowders, begging your pardon, better than you. Their bark’s bad, but their bite’s worse. We should come upon the parish here. But the wife and children are aboard, and I sail with the tide.”

“Where to, Jan?” asked Hugh.

“To Falmouth,” answered the fisherman. “Tis my wife’s native place, and I’m known there, and can live, I hope; though

'tis hard to be hunted out of dear old Treport. But them seventy pounds of yours, Cap.—trust me, if I work my fingers to the bone, I'll pay them back."

"No hurry. Good-luck to you, Jan!"
answered Hugh ; and they parted.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH LADY LARPENT RECEIVES A VISIT

“ **A** PERSON, my lady, that very much wishes to see your ladyship, please!” said the chief butler, sliding deferentially on noiseless feet up to the corner of the Dowager’s writing-table, in that study wherein the lady of Llosthuel, as has been mentioned, transacted most of the business that forms a necessary sequence to the possession of landed property.

“ What sort of person?” asked Lady Larpent, putting down her pen.

The butler coughed.

“Very respectably dressed, my lady.
Did not seem to like giving his name.
From another part of the country, he
said.”

Now the butler-in-chief at Llosthuel Court knew his duty, as he would himself have modestly declared, and was as thoroughly imbued with the traditions of butlerdom as any member of the fraternity of men-servants within the compass of Britain. It would, to him, have been a labour of love to turn from the door any person of either sex, however decent in manner and apparel, who should presume to seek admission without stating a reason and giving a name. But Lady Larpent had some peculiarities. She was as easy of access as Dryden’s rhymes record Lord

Chancellor Shaftesbury to have been, and would rather have endured importunity than run the risk of shutting her ears against some well-founded complaint or cry of distress.

“You may show the person in, Parker,” said the mistress of Llosthuel; and the obedient butler forthwith went in quest of the anonymous applicant for admission, ushered him into the Dowager’s room of business, and retired.

“You wished to speak to me, Mr.—Mr.—,” said Lady Larpent, to give the visitor an opportunity for self-introduction.

“I do, very much, wish to say a few words to your Ladyship,” returned the man, with grave politeness; and there was something in the inflection of his deep voice,

harsh, but modulated as those of the uneducated never are, which struck upon her ear, and made her eye the speaker more attentively than she had done before. At first sight she had set down the man, middle-aged, swarthy, ill-favoured of feature, and neatly clad in a suit of glossy black broadcloth, as a farmer seeking a farm, or perhaps a mining captain. Now she was more disposed to consider him as a civil engineer, or possibly the promoter of some Company travelling in search of shareholders, to be recruited by the aid of a fluent tongue and an alluring prospectus.

“On what subject, may I ask? Please to be seated,” said Lady Larpent.

“I thank you, my Lady, but I prefer to stand,” replied the man, in whom the

reader has no doubt recognised the Miller of Pen Mawth; “and I will be as brief—knowing your Ladyship’s time to be of value—as I can. All I ask is a fair and patient hearing—yes, and one thing more, my Lady: that is, that you will be so kind as to bear in mind that, in doing what I do, I have no private object to gain, no selfish ends to compass, but act, in this instance, wholly and solely for the sake of truth and justice.”

This was very plausibly spoken, and with a weight of emphasis that would not have been thrown away upon any audience. Lady Larpent was impressed, in spite of herself, yet she did not altogether like the speaker, and did not by any means feel inclined to put implicit confidence in his assertions.

The Black Miller was not one of those who carry about with them that most ancient and natural of all letters of introduction which a frank and honest face affords. Still the man might be honest. And Lady Larpent was not one of those rich persons who drape themselves in the comfortable mantle of indolence, and who would sooner be cheated, if only the cheating were decorously conducted behind their august backs, than submit to be pestered with unwelcome revelations. The Dowager had in her, in fact, somewhat of the turn of mind which has prompted kings and caliphs ere now to go about their capitals in mean disguise, and under the cloud of their incognito to feel, as it were, the popular pulse.

“I shall be happy to listen to whatever

you may have to tell me, Mr. ——. By the way, you have not yet mentioned your name," said the Dowager.

"I have not told you my name, my Lady," answered Ralph Swart, with perfect composure; "and, with your permission, I will continue to be nameless. My poor personality goes for nothing in what I have to say. I am well aware," he continued, as his keen eye noted the signs of displeasure in Lady Larpent's face, "that, by withholding my name, I excite prejudice against myself and my story. The current of vulgar opinion sets strongly against those who blame others, and refuse to be confronted with the object of the accusation. Such persons are called by evil names. They are calumniators. They are base and malignant, and cowardly to boot. They

are stabbers in the dark. Yet a man may have good and sufficient reasons for not backing up the word of warning which he finds it his duty to utter by weighing his own credibility against that of the subject of it."

This was very artfully imagined. It is sometimes good diplomatic policy to outstrip the judgment of an unfriendly critic, and to forestall, so to speak, all the severe things that he will be sure to think ; just as Napoleon in a campaign was accustomed to discount the inevitable strategic blunders of his adversaries. The Black Miller, too, may have divined that Lady Larpent was precisely the person to pique herself on her own exemption from common prejudice. At any rate, the stratagem met with at least a partial success, for the Dowager knit her

judicial brows, and said, calmly: “I will hear whatever you have come to tell me, sir, although you do not give me your name.”

“I thank your Ladyship,” rejoined the Black Miller, in a voice as weighty as her own, “for your courtesy.—And now to business. There is a young man in Treport here in the position, thanks to your Ladyship’s patronage, of captain of a coasting steam-vessel.”

“Are you speaking of Captain Ashton—of Hugh Ashton?” exclaimed the Dowager, half incredulously, and opening her eyes a good deal wider than before.

“That is the name he bears,” replied the Black Miller, as composedly as before; “Hugh—Ashton.”

“Do you mean to imply,” asked the

Dowager, with feminine quickness, "that his name is not Ashton?"

"I imply, my Lady, nothing of the sort," returned Ralph Swart, slowly. "One thing I do say, and that plainly: Hugh Ashton is absolutely unworthy of your Ladyship's favours and protection. That much I know: and that much and no more, I repeat. Hugh—Ashton, if you please, is not deserving of the station he fills, or of the confidence reposed in him."

"Are you aware," demanded the Dowager, in a glow of generous indignation, "that the noble young fellow whom you traduce has rendered the very greatest service to our family—that he saved, at the risk of his own, the life of my niece, Miss Stanhope?"

"I never denied his courage, my Lady,"

replied Ralph Swart, with a slight sneer that made him even uglier than before. "He is bold enough, and a smart lad in his way; and more's the pity that he should have deceived you, as he has done."

"Deceived me!" repeated Lady Larpent, with an involuntary echo of the man's words, and then she looked the accuser full in the face. "You must prove your words, and explain them, if you wish to be believed."

"I beg your Ladyship's pardon, I am sure," returned the Black Miller, with an affected humility which seemed genuine, so well did he control the voice in which he spoke. "I have given offence, I fear, by unmasking the real character of one in whom your Ladyship feels an interest, and

perhaps I had better go." And Ralph Swart picked up his hat, which had been placed on the chair beside him, and seemed about to depart.

Of course Lady Larpent bade him stay. She would have been more or less than woman if she had not. A secret undivulged, and this grim, stern, mysterious denouncer threatening to leave the whole problem an insoluble riddle !

At the Dowager's request, then, Ralph Swart of Pen Mawth Mill laid down his hat again, and addressed himself to speak.

"For the sake of truth and justice, my Lady," he said, "I have come here, and for the sake of truth and justice I will comply with your Ladyship's wish that I should speak out more positively than I have hitherto done. You think me a coward, perhaps, my Lady,

because I do not choose to make my charges in the young man's presence, face to face, and stand or fall according to their proved truth. Now, I am not good-looking—not nice, as you ladies call it—a queer, cross-grained lump of a man. But I ask your Ladyship, do I look the sort of person to flinch from the angry looks, or words, or blows of any man, be it even your fisherman hero, if I thought fit, my Lady, to confront them?"

As he spoke, he seemed, like some vulture or other bird of prey, to draw back the dull film that coated his fierce eyes, and all the defiant ferocity of his rugged and masculine nature kindled in them at once. Lady Larpent noted the rigidity of the tigerish mouth, the black frown on the massive brow, and the ominous brightness

of the strong man's terrible eyes, and, with female rapidity of logic, she jumped at the conclusion that as her visitor was palpably not a craven, so he was presumably not a rogue.

"I do not believe that you would be easily alarmed," she said.

"Then credit me, my Lady," answered the Black Miller, with his ponderous emphasis of diction, "with telling the truth, until evidence proves me to be a liar. I say that young Hugh, there, is unworthy of your confidence. I intend the young Captain of the *Western Maid* to be his own accuser. Test him! Ask him if, in what he has told your Ladyship regarding his past life, he has kept nothing back. Ask him if it be not true that he is not what he seems. Ply him with fair, simple, straight-

forward questions, most easy for an honest man to answer, and mark the effect. His own conscience will do the rest. He will be uncertain as to the extent of your Ladyship's knowledge of his antecedents, and you will see him wince, and hear him stammer, and see the red of conscious guilt suffuse that bold forehead of his. If he give you the explanation, you have the right—I feel your Ladyship has the right—to demand, then, Lady Larpent, say and think the worst of me that ever was thought. But, if not, thank me for my warning!"

As he spoke, the slouching attitude of the Black Miller grew erect and dignified, his arm was outstretched, and his voice almost lost its habitual harshness, to become sonorous and clear in its fierce earnestness.

Then, with a bow, not such as rustics give, Ralph Swart took his leave, briefly declining all offers of refreshment, and striding to the outer door before the hurrying servant could reach it in response to the summons of the bell.

“Done the trick, I reckon, unless the legacy of Mother Eve to her daughters has, for once, gone astray!” muttered the Black Miller to himself, as he strode rapidly down the well-kept winding road.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE LEDGE.

THERE was one lofty cliff, known in local parlance as the Spanish Beacon, that overlooked Treport, and from the peak of which many a fire had probably gleamed forth through the blackness of the night to give warning that some floating castle, with high poop and gilded stern-gallery, and grinning cannon ranged in tiers, and the red and yellow standard of Castile at her masthead, was perilously near

the ill-defended coast. In later and more prosaic days the Beacon had been a favourite patrolling place for Custom-house officers and coast-guardsmen, commanding, as it did, a view of more than one creek and cove, and especially of St. Mary's Bay, which was screened by high crags from nearly every stand-point but this. To the Spanish Beacon, on the day succeeding that which had witnessed the last fruitless visit to Giles Treloar's lodging-house in Holloway, as well as the enforced self-expatriation of Jan Pennant the fisherman, Hugh Ashton, telescope in hand, made his solitary way.

It was a call of duty, in this case, which caused the young sailor to breast the steep hillside that overhung Treport. A merchant brig, heavily laden, was reported to

have got aground in St. Mary's Bay, and, although in no present danger, thanks to the fineness of the weather, might require assistance to get her fairly afloat again. Thanks to Hugh's own zealous efforts, the steamer was nearly ready for sea, and there was every chance that on the morrow the *Western Maid* should once more glide out of harbour to render aid to the embayed vessel.

Hugh's spirits rose at the prospect of a more stirring life than he had led of late, and it was with an elastic tread and a quick step that he climbed the steep road, Neptune bounding cheerily by his side. The great Newfoundland had taken a remarkable fancy to the young stranger—Hugh Ashton was indeed one of those whom dogs and children love—and was fond of accom-

panying him whenever he went abroad.

Once on the highest point of the cliff—where a flagstaff, erected by command of H.M.'s Board of Revenue, occupied the spot where once, by sanction of the Queen's Highness, furze and faggots were stacked around the stout tar-barrel that was to apprise Elizabeth's liege subjects of the two religions that tyrant Spain, rich with the gold of Mexico and the silver of Peru, and drawing recruits for her ships and regiments from three European countries beneath the sceptre of the gloomy bigot of the Escurial, threatened their shores with his costly navy.—Hugh adjusted his glass, and, with a practised eye, surveyed St. Mary's Bay. There was work going on, evidently, on board the brig. Carts and horses were busy on the beach, and a black line of men,

busy as ants, could be seen to form a living bridge between the ship and the shore.

“They are landing a part of their cargo,” said Hugh, shutting up his glass. “They will be light, and the rising tide will float them off without help from steam. I don’t think, unless the wind shifts and freshens,” he added, taking that deliberate, steady look at the horizon which only shepherds and sailors take, “that the *Western Maid* will be wanted in St. Mary’s Bay. What ails the dog? Why, Nep! Nep!”

Hugh Ashton had some reason for his surprise, since Neptune, ordinarily as staid and majestic an animal, once the first moments of frisky enjoyment at sallying forth

were over, as Cornwall could supply, suddenly began to run up and down on the very verge of the cliff, precisely as you may see an intelligent sheep-dog pace up and down an invisible boundary-line beyond which his woolly charge are not to pass.

Presently Neptune came up to Hugh whimpering, and thrust his cold nose into the young man's hand; then, with a quick, hoarse bark, he bounded towards the edge of the cliff, and, finding that he was not followed, lifted his head and howled eloquently.

"What d'ye want, Nep, boy?" asked Hugh, walking slowly towards the precipice.

Again the dog barked, reproachfully, as

Hugh fancied, as dogs do bark when they find it hard to impart their meaning to their human friends.

“I wish Nep could speak,” said the young sailor, as he reached the dizzy edge of the cliff. “Why,” he exclaimed, as he looked down, and his very heart seemed to stop beating at the sight he saw, “the dog was right!”

What Hugh saw was, forty feet below, a man clinging, as lizards cling, to a slanting and slippery ledge of splintered rock, jutting from the dull crimson face of the storm-beaten cliff; while, many hundred feet below, gleamed the white line of surf upon the narrow beach, studded with jagged rocks, and resounded, hollow and hungry, the low roar of the sea. Some two yards off, beyond the reach of mortal arm, grew,

in a cleft, a withered furze-bush, and this afforded the only branch, or root, or trunk, for a considerable distance to left and right, to which a desperate hand might cling. As for scaling the cliff in front, beetling as it did, a fly might have done it; but neither goat nor man, nor even the sure-footed hill-fox. And, below, roared and yawned the hungry sea.

Hugh had seasoned nerves, and a sailor's steadiness of brain; but he felt sick and giddy for a moment as he saw the dire peril of the unfortunate one beneath. How the poor creature, whoever he was, had reached the place where he now hung suspended in mid-air, was explained by the rope that dangled, tantalizingly out of reach, above his head.

Instinctively Hugh looked for the other

end of the dangling cord. It was made fast to an iron peg firmly driven into the earth near the verge of the cliff, close by which two other coils of slender rope were nestling amidst the rank couch-grass. The dog barked again. Then the man below lifted his pale young face, and Hugh and he knew each other at once.

“Why, Will Farleigh!” exclaimed the former.

“Yes, Captain!” gasped out poor Will, clinging to the ledge. “All my own fault; I don’t deny it. But you see I’ve had Death for a playfellow so long that I am like the pitcher that went to the well once too often. These granite cliffs have got crystals in them as sharp as a glazier’s diamond. One of them has cut the rope, that

rubbed across its edge, as clean as a knife would have done. I went down because the red-legged choughs make their nests still among the fissures, and a Cornish chough is worth two gold guineas any day at a London bird-stuffer's. And the mother wants port-wine and comforts that—— But I was a fool, wasn't I? Break it gently to her and to Rose, please!"

"Hold on, hold on!" cried Hugh, encouragingly, as he hauled in the severed rope, and, with a sailor's dexterity, proceeded to splice it with one of the other coils of cordage. "I'll lower away, and haul you up with the help of the coast-guard yonder. I see his glazed hat, and the gleam of the pistol in his belt, as he comes on his patrol along the path."

"That's just what's impossible, Captain

Ashton," answered the bird-hunter, despairingly. "See how I've had to drive my fingers and feet into the earth to hold on. As it is, they're getting main tired, and soon, I'm thinking, I shall have to give in, and let go. My hands are cramped and numbed, and I could not spare one to catch at the rope."

"Then I'll try another plan," returned Hugh; and, hastily making a running noose at the end of the cord, he lowered it over the cliff edge, and, taking a firm hold of the rope, went boldly down, hand over hand, availing himself of every projection or angle of the crag on which his feet could rest.

"Ware! You'll go down two hundred yards into that murdering sea!" cried out Will Farleigh, unselfishly, as he saw his

rescuer swing himself over the giddy depths below.

But, in less time than it takes to write it, Hugh was kneeling among the gnarled roots of the withered furze-bush, and was leaning forward to pass the running noose around Will's body.

“ Let it slip over, so as to take you beneath the armpits. It will never keep firm, else !” cried Hugh.

It was a moment of deadly peril to both. There was a fatal fascination tempting the adventurers to look below, where the cruel rocks and the roaring sea awaited their victims, and where the giddy depths of air would have caused the soundest brain to reel. With no slight risk and trouble the noose was at last slipped beneath the bird-hunter's arms.

“Now go up, my lad!” said Hugh, encouragingly. “I shall do well enough until you let down the rope for me.”

“I can’t do it, with these stiff hands, and joints racked with pain,” gasped out Will Farleigh, who was evidently much exhausted. “God help me! Save yourself, Captain Hugh, and never mind me.”

“Keep your heart up, and hold on to stone and earth for a minute or two longer, to save a jerk on the line,” called out Hugh; and then, hailing the coast-guardsman, who by this time was peering over the verge of the precipice, he begged him to make fast and lower away the third piece of cord. The man was quick in complying with his injunction. The rope was lowered; and once, twice, Hugh caught at it in vain; but, the third time it swayed near him, he

succeeded in grasping it ; and, with surprising boldness and agility, struggled upwards to the beetling brow of the cliff, where the coastguard, kneeling and stooping over, caught him by the arm, and drew him safely over the edge.

Then came the work of hauling up Will Farleigh from his precarious post on the slippery ledge ; a laborious task, since the bird-hunter, expert cragsman though he was, could do nothing in his spent condition to expedite the process ; and when at last he stood on firm ground, and the tightened noose was withdrawn, he staggered from physical exhaustion, and was compelled to lean on Hugh's shoulder for support.

“ If ever there comes a chance, Captain Ashton, that a man's life would need to be risked to do you a good turn, mine's ready

and willing," said the poor fellow, with moistened eyes, as, leaning on Hugh's strong arm, he walked slowly down the steep path that led to the town. But such a near shave as that almost sickens a chap of his trade!"

It was quite evident that Neptune, as with joyous bark and rough gambols he frisked his way down the hill, was perfectly well aware of his own share in the rescue.

Once arrived at the cottage, Will told his tale, dwelling, characteristically, but little on his own sufferings, or the fearful suspense he had endured as he hung helpless in the presence of a terrible death, but painting in glowing colours Hugh Ashton's bravery and strength.

And Rose Trawl, coming suddenly for-

ward, caught up Hugh's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"You have saved dear Will!" she said. "You have been so good and patient with my grandfather! How shall I thank you enough, Captain Ashton, or how shall we all thank you as we ought to do? It seems but the other day that you came among us a stranger."

Hugh laughed.

"Nep really does deserve some praise, Miss Rose," said he, "since but for him we should have known nothing. And Will Farleigh, in time of need, would have done as much for me."

At this moment there was a knocking at the outer door, and 'Nezer, the dwarf factotum of the establishment, who went to answer it, returned, carrying a letter which

one of the grooms from Llosthuel Court had just brought down.

“For you, skipper!” said the dwarf, handing the letter to Hugh.

“Lady Larpent wishes to see me instantly; she does not say why,” said the young man, as he finished the perusal of some half-dozen lines in the Dowager’s bold black handwriting. “I will go up to the Court at once.”

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

LADY LARPENT, after the visit of the Black Miller of Pen Mawth, was in anything but an enviable frame of mind. The Dowager was, as women go, a thoroughly good woman. There might be a little worldly rust about her heart, but the heart itself was of sterling gold. In truth, her weak point, as often happens with us, was precisely what she deemed her strongest coign of vantage, her shrewd, cool, prudent

head. She had the pride of intellect far more than the coarser pride of rank or money. If she detected a knavish servant, or struck out a wrongful item in a tradesman's bill, she was vainer of her victory than of the fact that her wealth and rank, and strength of will, made her a personage and a power in the land. Now she was wounded, galled, stung, and that precisely where the smart was sharpest, in that her knowledge of the world had to all appearance been grossly at fault.

She had thought so well of Hugh Ashton! Other protégés she had, in common parlance, taken up, merely to find them fall short of her estimate, or break in her hands. But this noble young fellow had borne himself hitherto with a gallantry and a discretion that did credit to her choice.

Secretly, she had sighed more than once as she contrasted her own coxcomb of a son, callous, flippant, dead to generous impulse, and this brave young Hugh. Had she but had such a son as Hugh Ashton—— But, that being impossible, she had cherished vague projects of future promotion for the fisherman of Bala Lake; and all the bitterer was the disenchantment that followed. Nobody likes to have wasted kindness on an unworthy object, and Lady Larpent least of all. And that Hugh was unworthy, the Dowager very much feared. She had taken him on trust. Of his past life she knew, save from his own lips, nothing at all. And how if his own account of his past life had been untrue; how, if he had left out something, the mention of which would have condemned him!

That the Black Miller was an enemy of Hugh's she never for an instant doubted. But then enmity is not necessarily co-existent with calumny. But for private hate, for private resentment, the law would most rarely be invoked to redress wrongs, or to punish the wrong-doer. Justice awaits, in passive attitude, and with bandaged eyes, the moment when the cry of human suffering shall cause her to make use of sword or scales. And Ralph Swart had done his work well. Lady Larpent hardly knew how much her crafty visitor had contrived to suggest, and how little he had managed to affirm. He had said, roundly, that he intended Hugh to be his own accuser. He had laid down, as if unconsciously, the lines on which the Dowager might act. There was to be no formal charge, but merely a query or two;

and the Black Miller had shewn a grim confidence as to the result, which, although unwelcome, was contagious. Under the influence of these newly-formed suspicions, the lady of Llosthuel had written to Hugh requesting his prompt attendance at Llosthuel Court.

The missive sealed and despatched, Lady Larpent awaited, with a nervous impatience that surprised herself, the coming of him whom she had summoned to receive, it well might be, his sentence of dismissal and disgrace. For a time she remained in her study, making an elaborate pretence of being extremely busy ; but the figures in her columns of accounts swam and danced before her eyes, and the letters she perused joined in one monotonous chorus of “Hugh Ashton—guilty—guilty—guilty !” Then

she locked up her letters, and went back to the drawing-room, and was absent, moody, and snappish in her talk with her niece, until Maud marvelled what had befallen her kind, shrewd aunt, to change her thus.

“Captain Ashton—in the study, please, my Lady,” murmured obsequious Parker; and to the study Lady Larpen once more repaired.

Hugh wondered that his patroness answered his salutation by so cold a bow.

“Please to sit down, Captain Ashton,” said the Dowager, stiffly, as she took, with a more judicial air than usual, her own seat in her high-backed chair. “I have sent for you—on a painful errand this time, Captain Ashton.”

“Indeed, Lady Larpen!” returned Hugh,

turning his frank eyes towards his kind old friend, whose changed manner puzzled him.

“Yes; I have heard—no matter what—suffice it,” continued the Dowager, “that it seems as though you had not told me, Mr. Ashton, all that I had a right to know.”

Hugh started and reddened. Start and flush were very slight, but quite sufficient to be marked by a keen observer on the look-out for such signs, and ready to draw deductions from them.

“I do not quite, Lady Larpent, apprehend your meaning,” he said.

“I will put the case more clearly,” resumed the Dowager, with a look of annoyance. “I do not think you have been as explicit with me as—as—perhaps you might

have been. Are you sure, for instance, that your right name is Ashton?"

Again Hugh winced perceptibly.

"I bear the name as my father bore it," he replied, with some awkwardness.

"Of that I am aware," rejoined the Dowager, coldly. "You have led a wandering life, Mr. Ashton, and it signifies little, no doubt, as to a mere name. There is a more important topic on which I must speak. Of my own regard for you, and—and the high opinion we have all had of you, and the debt of gratitude due to the preserver of my niece's life, I need not speak. I have done my best to be your friend, have I not?"

"Indeed, Lady Larpent, you have," answered Hugh; and his handsome young

face looked so honest and true as he spoke the words that it was almost with a sob, which she turned into a cough, that Lady Larpent resumed :

“ The more shame for you, Hugh Ashton, then, if, as I fear is the case, you have deceived me !”

“ Deceived you, Lady Larpent !” cried Hugh, starting to his feet.

“ Deceived us all, I may say,” continued the Dowager, who, the ice once broken, went on with all of a woman’s outspoken vehemence of complaint, “ since we have all had an opinion of you which—which I hope may have been deserved. I believed what you told me, the very little that you told me, of your past years, as sailor and colonist, and was content to take you and

have been. Are you sure, for your right name is Ashton?"

Again Hugh winced perceptively.

"I bear the name as my father replied, with some awkwardness.

"Of that I am aware," said the Dowager, coldly. "You have done your friend, Mr. Ashton, a little, no doubt, as to a mere name, but there is a more important topic on which I have done my friend, and the high opinion we have of you, and the debt of gratitude we owe to the preserver of my niece's life, I have done my friend, have I not?"

"Indeed, Lady Larpent, swerved Hugh; and his head

face looked so honest and true as he spoke the words that it was almost with a sob, which she turned into a cough, that Lady Larpent resumed :

“The more shame for you, Hugh Ashton, then, if, as I fear is the case, you have deceived me !”

“Deceived you, Lady Larpent !” cried Hugh, starting to his feet.

“Deceived us all, I may say,” continued the Dowager, who, the ice once broken, went on with all of a woman’s outspoken vehemence of complaint, “since we have all had an opinion of you which—which I hope may have been deserved. I believed what you told me, the very little that you told me, of your past years, as sailor and colonist, and was content to take you and

your father for plain, honest boatmen, with education and manners, I admit, superior to your station. Since then, it has come to my ears——”

The Dowager hesitated here, and Hugh Ashton asked, half sternly :

“ I have not yet learned what it is which has reached your Ladyship’s ears concerning me.”

“ That you have not been open with us, and candid, and sincere, Captain Ashton,” answered Lady Larpent, eyeing Hugh as though she hoped to search his heart with the intensity of her gaze ; “ that you have exercised a reticence—perhaps a prudent one—as to secrets which——”

“ Secrets ! ” Hugh could not help repeating the word, although he did it with a quivering lip and a troubled mien, which

added fuel to the fire of the Dowager's very natural suspicions.

“Secrets,” said the Dowager, knitting her imperious brows, “are never desirable, of course; but they need not imply sin or shame. You best know, young man, if that which you have hitherto kept is innocent or not.”

“Spare me this!” uttered Hugh, huskily, as he shaded his eyes with his open hand and turned his face away.

“I have been most friendly towards you, Mr. Ashton, in thought, and word, and deed,” pursued the Dowager. “It is, then, as a friend that I ask of you, has nothing—nothing of serious import—been kept back? Are you, in fact, what you seem to be?”

“You have been well informed, I fear,

Lady Larpent; by what means I cannot guess—too well informed," answered Hugh, in a broken voice.

In the Dowager's ears this was tantamount to a confession of guilt. And yet it was pity of him too, she felt, this hidden sin, done years ago, it might be, coming home, like a halting Nemesis, to this gallant youth, who had seemed the very soul of unselfish courage and stainless faith. What had he done? It was difficult to connect the idea of Hugh Ashton with any mean crime, such as peoples our jails, with forgery or theft, for instance. But a bushranger's career of desperate adventure might have had temptations for so daring a spirit, or there might be blood on that hand—the hand that had saved Maud's life!

“If you could explain——” began Lady Larpent, with weighty patience; but Hugh interrupted her.

“I cannot!” he said, with a groan. “I would give the best years of my life if—— But that is useless now. I had hoped, in an obscure situation and lonely place, that the past might be buried. “It seems,” he added, bitterly, “that I was wrong, and that the finger of shame may be pointed at me even here.”

“Then, Captain Ashton,” said the Dowager, with a touch of magisterial severity, “is it not for yourself to decide whether you will risk exposure to—to unpleasantness by remaining any longer in Treport? I cannot—that is to say, the Board cannot—deprive you of your post as Captain of our steamer on mere suspicion, certainly.

But if you stay, and challenge proof of what you scarcely affect to deny, the whole story will become public, and you could scarcely avoid resigning your appointment, even if——”

“You are right, Lady Larpent. Yes, I feel I ought to go,” returned the young man, hiding his face and letting his head droop sadly upon his breast. “What I regret the most is the loss—so it seems—of your good opinion.”

The dejection of his attitude, the muffled sound of his low voice, moved the Dowager to pity while confirming her suspicions.

“I would have given much, Hugh Ashton, to have heard you justify——” she said, falteringly.

“The task, though I would lay down my life for it, is beyond me,” said the young

man, gloomily. "I can but go, and that, Lady Larpent, I will do at once. May I hope that you will be silent as to what you have heard?"

"Certainly I will, if you consent to quit Treport without delay," replied the Dowager. "Nor do I forget your services to the family, or your good conduct here. Money may enable you to go abroad, and efface, by time and distance, the memory of the past. If a cheque for four hundred pounds, or five——"

"I thank you, Lady Larpent, but I need for nothing," answered Hugh, drawing himself up to his full height, and speaking with a quiet dignity that became him well. "The day may come, perhaps, when you may regret the severe judgment which you have formed of me."

He said no more, but, with a slight inclination of the head, turned and left the room and the house. The last glance of the young sailor's sad, proud eyes haunted the Dowager's memory for many a day afterwards.

CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL, MAUD.

IT was a bright and beautiful morning which dawned upon the west of England on the day following that on which Hugh Ashton had saved the bird-hunter's life, and had his own unsatisfactory interview with Lady Larpent. He was not one to loiter or to lose time when once his mind was made up, and already his few and simple preparations for departure had been effected. He had written to the

secretary of the Board, his employers, giving in the resignation of his command. The keys of the lockers in his cabin on board the steamer, with the telescope and some other objects belonging to the Tug and Salvage Company, he had intrusted to old Captain Trawl's care on behalf of their lawful owners. His own boxes were packed, and were to remain under the charge of his late kind host, until he should write to indicate the address to which they were to be forwarded.

A harder task than these merely mechanical duties Hugh Ashton found to be that of bidding farewell to his good friends beneath whose roof he dwelt, and without explaining the cause of his abrupt departure. That the young Captain of the *Western Maid* should suddenly throw up

his appointment, quit the town in which he had come to be regarded with liking and respect, and renounce the occupation in which he had already won high credit with all, seemed utterly unaccountable. That Lady Larpent was somehow connected with Hugh's apparently capricious change of plans, was easily to be conjectured ; but what could be the reasons that could have induced the imperious Lady Paramount of Llosthuel to desire the absence of one who had so lately been a prime favourite, and whose conduct since his promotion had surely been such as to content the most exacting patroness that ever lived ! The thing was inexplicable.

Hugh, who alone possessed the key to the enigma, shook his head sadly when the old Captain and his grand-daughter ques-

tioned him on the subject of his abrupt change of plans.

“Do not ask me, dear friends, why I must leave you. Some day, perhaps—But now I can merely tell you that go I must, and that the *Western Maid* will never know my tread upon her deck again.”

He avoided all unnecessary leave-takings.

“Wish Long Michael, and the crew, and the good fisher-folk good-bye for me; and give them my best wishes,” he said to Will and Rose and the aged Captain. “I shall not go among them again for a last hand-shake, but would rather get quietly out of Treport.”

Hugh had decided wisely when he determined not to bid his outspoken acquaintances on Treport quay and its vicinity a personal adieu. It was of course impossible

to take a crowd into his confidence, and there would have been remonstrance, and regret, and cheering ; for no stranger in the little coast town had ever become, in so short a space of time, one half so popular as Hugh Ashton had done. As it was, he said farewell, sorrowfully enough, to his friends at the cottage door, and set off on foot, with stick and bundle, like any poor sailor going to seek employment in some distant port.

At the garden gate he turned for a last look at the group that remained, sadly watching him beside the door. There was the grey-haired old Captain, leaning on a staff, and by no means the sturdy figure to look upon that he had been a few short months ago ; there was pretty Rose, with her affianced husband by her side ; and

there was the dwarfish form of 'Nezer, holding back the dog, which struggled boisterously in its efforts to follow Hugh. The young man waved his hat to them in token of farewell, and then was lost to sight.

Hugh had come into Treport, when first nominated to the command of the steamer, cheerily enough, and with fair prospects opening out before him. He was leaving the place now, sorrowful and weary-hearted, but steadfast as a sleuth-hound to the purpose to the fulfilment of which he had devoted his young life.

Many thoughts passed through his busy brain as he climbed the steep hill-side, choosing unfrequented paths and by-lanes, where he was not likely to meet any who knew him. It would have been painful to

him to have to stop and converse now with one who had made his acquaintance during his brief season of prosperity, and could not now perhaps refrain from expressions of curiosity or condolence. Once, from a turn in the road, he looked down upon the sea-side portion of the town, where the gabled houses clustered thickly together, where the nets were hung to dry from masts protruding from the windows, and where, in the quay-pool itself, in the midst of sails of many colours—orange, tawny, and red—lay the *Western Maid*, taut and trim. He shook his head sadly, and walked resolutely on.

Threading his way by devious tracks, and those sinuous lanes which, in country places, often appear to have sprung spontaneously into existence, so trifling appears to be their

utility to the common-weal, Hugh at length drew near to Llosthuel.

The Court, as has been said, stands nobly forward on a swell of rising ground, and commands a pretty prospect of Treport nestling below, and a grand one of cliff and headland, and the measureless Atlantic flashing far away. But the grounds are less notable than the house. Many a Kent or Sussex squire, with only three or four poor annual thousands to form his rent-roll, has a far more spacious and stately demesne to girdle in his red-brick Hall than had my Lady Larpent of Llosthuel, who was so rich. The fact is that Cornish gentlemen of fair estate, like French viscounts or Belgian barons, were in bygone times less desirous of privacy than were those of the squirearchy who dwelt east of the Tamar,

and thus there was a tract of uninclosed common land which came very near to Llosthuel Court.

Hugh Ashton knew the place well. It was a spot where the wild rocks, with golden gorse and yellow broom rooting themselves in every cleft and crevice, came close up to the tall paling that shut in the well-kept rose-garden of the Court. No contrast could have been greater than that of the barren tract outside that charmed barrier—with its scarce grass and brown heather, the bushes, the bare stones, and a few black pine-trees bent and distorted by years of hopeless contest with the mighty sea-wind—and the trim parterres and velvet lawns and wealth of colour within.

But, bare, bleak, and uninviting as the ragged patch of rocky common land might

be, it afforded to Hugh Ashton the opportunity which he sought, to gaze from afar, unseen, at Maud's windows, and to bid her an unspoken farewell. With a lover's ingenuity, he had found out, in the course of his occasional visits to the Court, which were the apartments that the Dowager had assigned to her beautiful niece. Those curtains of white and pink belonged probably to Maud's own chamber; the blue silken ones beyond, to the morning-room attached to it. Might it not be possible that, if he did but watch long enough, he might catch a glimpse of Maud herself at a window?

He smiled sadly enough at the boyish dream. No; he should not see her then; should see her, perhaps, never more. Never more! To a lover that means

much ; means the loss of life's choicest zest and savour, a dull greyness in the pellucid atmosphere and the sparkling sky, an uneasy sense that there is something out of tune in the grand harmonies of the universe.

And it was probable enough that Hugh and Maud, the one so high in station, and beauty, and prospective wealth, the other destined to earn a livelihood by dint of sheer hard work, would never meet again. Would she quite forget him ? he wondered. And did she care for him, even a little, even as a friend of humble degree ? for, mindful of the difference of position, he had never breathed to her a word that could reveal his love.

And yet how he loved her ! how warmly and how truly, and yet with a knightly

devotion and tenderness such as we are apt to consider as having died out with the death of the best era of semi-mythic chivalry.

Had Hugh but lived six centuries before, he would have worn Maud's colours, and broken lances in tournament and battle-field for the fame of her beauty, and perhaps touched her heart, at last, by the renown of gallant deeds of derring-do performed for her dear sake. As it was, he was leaving Treport—he knew it—under a cloud of most undeserved disgrace. He had innocently forfeited Lady Larpent's good opinion; and he shrank from the thought that Miss Stanhope, like the rest of the world, might put some uncharitable construction upon his abrupt exit from Treport.

“Farewell, Maud—farewell!” he murmured, as his gaze lingered long upon the windows of the rooms she occupied at Llosthuel. “I go, perforce in silence, burying in my breast the love I have not dared to tell. Shall I—can I—ever hope to win her—ever hope that Maud will be my wife? It seems the mere madness of presumption even to dream of such a future of bliss. What am I in her eyes? Merely, no doubt, a poor fisherman, who once had the luck to render her a service, and was rewarded for it by a promotion that turned out to be short-lived. And yet I have rights—could I but venture to claim them—and a word from me would—But the word must remain unspoken!”

Very sad, to judge by the almost de-

spairing expression of his handsome young face, were the thoughts that now traversed the brain of Hugh Ashton. Twice he turned, as though to leave the place, and twice he checked himself, and again fixed his eyes upon the house that held the beautiful girl whom he felt to be so hopelessly out of his reach.

“Never, never!” he muttered, at length. “The Dowager herself, so kind before, was quite changed when that accursed rumour, whence I know not, came to her ears. I could see that she looked on me as a sort of outlaw—outlawed for no fault of my own, it is true, but none the less to be hounded and hunted out of the place. So dreadful and so tenacious is the stain of imputed guilt! And he, so noble and pure and gentle, lived and died, without right

being done, hidden from the face of day ; and I alone, perhaps, of all the world, believe in the cruel wrong that he endured so meekly."

Hugh was silent for a space, and then, with a last lingering look at the windows of the two pretty rooms, he murmured once more :

"Farewell, Maud, farewell!" and tore himself away.

Ten minutes of hard walking brought him to a turnpike road, down which he turned almost mechanically, as if he cared not whither he went, now that Treport was left behind him.

"Farewell, sweet Maud—my love, my love—of that, at least, they cannot rob me," he said, bitterly, as he looked back and

caught one more distant view of Llösthuvel, and then in silence pursued his way.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PENZANCE COACH.

MISFORTUNE, like a gale of wind, acts very differently upon different natures. There are trees that bend, and trees that break beneath the violence of the storm ; and, as it is with the higher forms of vegetable life, so it is with men. There are light shallow temperaments that yield to the crush of adversity like fen-reeds and bulrushes to the tempest, but that spring up, not a whit the worse, when the danger

has passed by. There are other and sturdier dispositions that creak and groan, like obstinate oaks, and throb in every fibre, until perhaps they go down with a great ruin. And, again, there are those that fight so long as resistance serves, then bow to the inevitable, and presently assert their elastic life by rising, bruised, but not killed, to tower aloft as of yore.

Hugh Ashton, as he walked rapidly along the muddy road that led—whither he knew not, and cared not, for the moment—could only half realise the weight of the heavy stroke that Fate had dealt him. The blow had been unexpected, and it had left its bitter smart. The kind hand that had led him to Cornwall and Treport had suddenly become estranged and hostile, and had thrust him out again to do as best he

might in the eternal battle of life. To earn his bread was, in truth, no very dire necessity for Hugh Ashton. It was not as when some timid girl, some inexperienced stripling, is thrown on his or her own resources, to swim, as it were, without swimming-belt or life-buoy, in that great sea of struggling humanity where to sink is to starve. But Hugh had a double purpose, even if he forgot the high-born girl who had so entwined herself with his very heart-strings. He must live, and though he had, even after his bounty to Jan the fisherman, nearly a hundred and eighty pounds in his pocket, he must live by work. And then he had an object in view that was in his eyes sacred.

What was he, the late commander of the *Western Maid*, to do? His most natural

course would have been to take to the sea, and to seek, and probably after some seeking find, a place as officer on board some Australian liner, or clipper in the China trade. He was precisely what a prudent skipper, knowing the little world of a ship, and what squalls and mutinies and head-winds mean, would wish his mate to be. But to go to sea was to leave England, to take again to a roving and a restless life, and to renounce the active prosecution of the search to which he found himself committed, as the Knights of the Round Table were bound to pursue the quest of the Holy Grail. His great desire, when first, after his mother's death, he came over to England with his father, had always been to obtain certain proofs, most valuable, most hard to discover. Hitherto, he had been able to

do little or nothing to effect the object to which he had professed such entire devotion ; but, now he should have leisure, he trusted to be more earnest in the task that lay before him.

“Perhaps,” Hugh muttered to himself, as he strode on—“perhaps it is all for the best. New ties and new duties are done with and broken—love itself is hopelessly left behind me—and it may be better so. In yonder little Cornish seaport I should have had small prospect of finding any better clue to the hard riddle which has perplexed me so long, than could be afforded by the flitting visits of that female Will-o’-the-Wisp, Ghost Nan. And for one gipsy I shall meet on this side of Tamar, or for that matter of Poole Harbour, I shall find ten nearer to London. London!

There is nothing like the great city with its vague possibilities and shadowy futures. London should surely be the goal of all such aimless wanderers as myself."

"Hi, hi, young chap!" cried out a cheery voice, somewhat hoarse from a protracted course of rough weather and alcoholic stimulants, and which mingled not in-harmoniously with the clatter of wheels and the clash of horse-hoofs. "Hi, there!"

Hugh glanced over his shoulder, and stepped aside to let the Penzance coach, as it came rattling up, pass by. The good-humoured coachman who drove it, getting a better look at Hugh than he had had before, jerked up his elbow in professional style.

"Going down the road, sir, our way?"

Just in time to catch the up-train, if you are," he said, pulling up the four horses with no apparent effort; and Hugh, who in his present frame of mind found the invitation irresistible, sprang to the roof of the coach with a sailor's activity, and the four horses were gathered up and set in motion again.

The coachman looked inquisitively round at his young passenger. The box-seat was occupied by a heavy bucolical person, who thought very much of sheep, bullocks, and oil-cake, but of horses very little, and on miscellaneous topics not at all; so that the coachman found the journey, unenlivened by eleemosynary ale or congenial conversation, a dull one. Hugh's appearance puzzled him somewhat. The young ex-captain wore his plainest clothes, and had

a stick and a bundle, exactly like any common sailor "ashore and atramp," as the coachman worded it; but he did not look, to the coachman's experienced eye, like Jack of the forecastle, even when Jack is at his best.

"Left your yacht, sir, somewhere?" asked the coachman, politely. He had been a nobleman's coachman before he became the charioteer of the public, and he prided himself, like many of his class, on his unerring recognition of a gentleman. Hugh Ashton, mud-bespattered, and with a stick and bundle, seemed to him to be, somehow, a gentleman.

"I have left my ship—no yacht, though—as you say," answered Hugh, smiling in spite of his sadness.

“Ah, well!” said the coachman, meditatively, “there’s a good many, now, of you young ones, that turn their hands—swells, mind ye—to all sorts of things. And as well take to the sea as take to the tea!”

Hugh laughed good-humouredly, less at the driver’s sally than at the pertinacious curiosity of the man.

“I, at any rate, have turned my hand to more trades than one,” he said, forcing himself to be cheerful. “Among others, I drove the Geelong coach over in Australia there, beneath a burning sun, one Christmas-time, and warm work it was.”

“Hot weather at Christmas, eh?” returned the loquacious coachman. “Well, I’ve

heard of that before, seeing I've a brother of my own on the underneath side of the world. Perhaps you've known him, sir? Name of Mathews—John Mathews."

Hugh explained that Australia was rather a large place, and that people were less likely to come in contact with one another there than in the crowded mother-country. And then he had to reply to questions as to the wonders of Topsyturvyland, as the driver called it, its duck-billed quadrupeds and black swans, its cherries with their stones worn conveniently outside, its scentless flowers and songless birds, its kangaroos, nuggets, and other natural productions of the unique Australasian world; at the mention of which, the corpulent agriculturist on the box-seat gave a grunt of contented incredulity, and murmur-

ed something, manifestly very much to his personal satisfaction, about "travellers' tales."

Chatting thus, the milestones seemed to succeed one another with reasonable promptitude; and presently the houses, that had hitherto been sparsely scattered, began to line the road, and a town came in sight, and a railway, the thin black telegraph wires and white posts standing out in bold relief against the wintry sky.

"Here we are," said the driver, tossing down his reins as the coach drew up to the station door; "and, as I said, just in time."

Hugh took his second-class ticket, as beffited a traveller of his modest pretensions; and the up-train, flashing like a meteor through the country, whirled him

off Londonwards. On the tireless wings of the enslaved geni, Steam, he was borne along, past mine and waste, past croft and garden ; now traversing some billowy moor, on whose rugged and heathery surface one rolling table-land seemed to succeed to another, while great grey rocks reared their defiant heads like so many towers built by Cyclopean masons of old ; and anon running through the midst of moist green pastures, where sleek red cattle, that by their long horns and their colour might have been of the original British breed, huddled shyly together to low forth deep-toned expressions of distrust as the fiery dragon, with rush and roar, flashed by.

Then a change came in the domestic architecture, visible to voyagers by the iron road. No more stone houses, no more

slates, met the eye, but red roofs and brick gables peeping out from lane, and hedge-row, and orchard. No more smelting-works, with heaps of glassy clinkers piled in dismal profusion outside, and foul black smoke rising in clouds to darken the ambient air. Here and there a limekiln, here and there a malthouse or a brewery, seemed the only signs of anything like manufacturing industry ; and the only machine to be heard or seen was the complaining windlass that made the heavy water-bucket come slowly up some deep old well, or the whirling steam-flail that sent up showers of feathery chaff in some farm-yard, as it thrashed the golden wheat or brown barley from the straw.

That is blue wood-smoke that rises in thin, ghostly wreaths above yonder cottage-

home, ivied until the dull red of the bricks can hardly be seen through the dusky greenery of the parasitic plant that clings so lovingly to the short massive chimney where swallows build their nests in the pleasant summer-time. How small, if picturesque, are the lozenge panes of those casements that let in so little light, shine the sun ever so brightly. The hoary apple-trees, so near to the little house, are all entwined with white-berried mistletoe, and the thick hedge must in May be glorious with hawthorn bloom and honeysuckle. To all appearance, the in-dwellers there are utterly unaffected by anything that has been done for the last few centuries. Progress has spared their little Sleepy Hollow. Steam flits past them, but that is all; and all the wonders of modern industry and

invention are, to them, living much as their forefathers lived before the Wars of the Roses, as if they had never been.

We are out of the pure, slumberous, old-world country now, and among the interminable suburbs that girdle in London as the pavilions and gardens of the Andalusian Vega girdled in old Moorish Granada. And this is London at last, with its canopy of fog and smoke, and its glow and glare of light breaking through the thick atmosphere, and the low, deep, mysterious roar that never seems to cease, until the hours of toil and pastime give place to the more solemn time for that temporary death which we call sleep.

“ ‘Shadwick’s Inn,’ Shadwick Place! Where may that be, sir?” asked the cabman, whom Hugh engaged, and whose

experience of London was for once at fault.

“Drive to St. Lawrence’s Lane—you know that, I suppose,” answered Hugh; “and anyone thereabouts will tell you where to find the place I speak of.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE OLD INN.

THE inn to which Hugh Ashton chose to drive was hard to find, and, when found, not very easy of access. Shadwick Place, situated in the purlieus of the long and straggling lane dedicated to St. Lawrence, in the City of London, has, at first sight, an inhospitable aspect. Not only are the words "No Thoroughfare" conspicuously painted on a corner house, but there are rusty iron chains which span the grass-

grown apology for a street, and that effectually prevent cart or carriage from intruding on the sacred territory. It is necessary for intending patrons of "Shadwick's Inn" to alight and go on foot up to its darkling doorway. The house of entertainment in question was the very antithesis of one of those crowded and noisy caravanserais that boast of their many hundred bed-rooms, their lifts, baths, and palatial dining-halls. There was no bustle at Shadwick's, which meekly called itself an inn, as if to disclaim any rivalry with modern hotels, and which in no way courted publicity.

A queerer, less obtrusive hostelry than Shadwick's could not have been found even in the City, where quaint old inns not seldom drag on a secluded and humble existence. On the lamp above the door

might be traced, in attenuated black letters, the words "Shadwick's Inn;" but there were no other signs of its status; and, indeed, the old house, with its dingy blinds and its closed door, seemed to affect a private air, and to deplore the meagre official announcement, in compliance with law and the dictates of a harsh excise, over the porch, to the effect that somebody was licensed to sell wines, spirits, and tobacco.

There was no touting, just as there were no advertisements, on behalf of Shadwick's. The odd little inn appeared rather to repel than to attract custom. When a guest of more than common resolution insisted on effecting an entry, he was tolerated, but not welcomed. It might have been supposed that Shadwick, or his successor, received a

fixed annual subsidy, perhaps from the corporation, to entertain travellers gratis, and that he pardonably did what he could to discourage too brisk a demand for accommodation beneath his roof.

London hotels, among which we may sweepingly classify inns and coffee-houses, are prone, it is said, to prize the traveller less for what he is than for what he has, and to measure the respectability of a newcomer by the amount of his luggage. Hugh had no luggage, unless a bundle can be dignified by such a term. And voyagers with bundles are expected to put up with very humble, not to say very queer, quarters. But Hugh's face and voice and address were so much in his favour that the bundle was condoned, even at Shadwick's, and the young man was grudgingly induct-

ed into a bed-room which, if dingy, was conventionally clean, and was made free of that well of gloom, the three-cornered little coffee-room. Hugh Ashton had a reason, of a sentimental character, perhaps, for this apparently capricious selection of a hostelry. He had been at Shadwick's before. It was at this old, out-of-the-way, and almost inaccessible inn that his father and himself had put up on landing after their homeward voyage from Australia. George Ashton had known of the place, through some accident, most likely, and had treasured the recollection of it in his memory, precisely as Romeo cherished the remembrance of the Mantuan Apothecary who might be counted on for the supply of poison at a critical moment. "I wanted to find a place"—Hugh well remembered

what his dead father's words had been—“where I should be in London, and yet as far remote from the London I once knew, as if I were in Africa or Greenland; a place, in fact, where no Pall Mall lounger or gossip of the clubs could possibly come across me. A better hermitage than this, no man could wish for.” And for his father's sake, and because of that strong and viewless chain of which habit and memory forge the links, Hugh had come back to Shadwick's.

In his then frame of mind, Hugh might have taken up his abode in much more pretentious establishments without finding any that suited so well with his humour. Shadwick's was a good deal more comfortable, in a smoke-dried and sunless sort of way, than might at first sight have been

conjectured. Shrinking strangers from the country wondered that its beds were so clean. The scrubby little waiter and the sad-eyed chambermaids knew their duties. The old clock that ticked so loudly in the triangular coffee-room was right to a minute. The steady fire gave out much heat. The dark old boxes of worm-eaten wood, a sort of gastronomic pews, within the dusky walls of which several generations of Britons had dined, were snug, if ill-ventilated. Steaks were underdone, but succulent; and the same might be said of chops, and of the cut from the joint; while for oyster-sauce, fried whiting, mackerel, and marrow-pudding, Shadwick's owned few equals, and no superior.

The great charm for a man of leisure and of a vivid imagination, in this extraordinary

old inn, was the poetry of it. An inn is rarely romantic, and the City of London is a very odd place in which to seek for the spirit of poetry—and yet it may be found. Nowhere else can there be such contrasts, between clamorous eagerness and silent, dull decay, between swarming crowds and empty courts or lanes, as in the commercial kernel of the most populous city in Europe or the world. There was something solemn, and almost touching, in the hush and quiet of Shadwick Place, with the surging roar and hum of the metropolis faintly audible, and ever and anon the striking of a score of simultaneous church clocks, or the deep toned thunder of the air-shaking bell of St. Paul's hard by.

From this old inn, secluded, if ever inn was, from the pomps and vanities of the

restless world that seethed and surged outside, Hugh Ashton made his way, not to Mr. Dicker's place of business, but to Mr. Dicker's private residence. So great a man as the railway director and capitalist, he reasoned, would be more likely to be found at that genial season of the year (for it was close upon Christmas, and the young literary lions of the *Daily Astonisher* were sharpening their pens for a new prose carol, in the shape of leading articles, wherein mince-pies and morality, orthodoxy and plum-pudding, punch and the cardinal virtues, were most picturesquely to be blended together) at home than at his civic counting-house.

The name and address of Arthur Wadmore Dicker, Esq., had been easily discovered by the help of the obese Postal

Directory which decorated a mahogany shelf in the coffee-room of “Shadwick’s Inn.” And Hugh Ashton, who had no social scruples to deter him from availing himself of the good offices of whatsoever omnibus, blue, green, yellow, or of that rich magenta which such public stage-carriages occasionally affect, would serve his turn, easily got himself conveyed to the vicinity of the rich man’s dwelling.

Mr. Dicker’s town-house was a town-house indeed—what in France would have been known by the style of hotel, and in Italy could not escape being dubbed a palace—one of those tremendous stuccoed mansions that domineer over Hyde Park, like so many robber fortresses tamed down to suit the present law-respecting epoch, and at the stately doors of which bewilder-

ed foreign travellers have been known to knock, addressing the disgusted footmen as "garçon" or "kellner," and asking, in continental speech, for rooms, dinner, and hot bath, under the mistaken idea that the "Grosvenor" or the "Langham" had been reached at last.

Hugh walked up and down once or twice before he applied his hand to the steel knocker, with anvil to correspond, a pattern of severe simplicity, on Mr. Dicker's door. It is not always without some excusable hesitation that a poor man ventures to pay Dives, in the midst of his purple and fine linen, the compliment of a call.

A magnate's surroundings are often by far more formidable or imposing than the magnate himself; just as a Lord Mayor, divested of his pomp and state, his robes

and jewel, his javelin-men, sword-bearer, chaplain, gilt coach, and men in armour, might be mistaken for any undistinguished citizen with an umbrella. Hugh, however, grew vexed with himself for his own diffidence, and brought the steel knocker into close contact with the steel anvil.

Mr. Dicker's powdered lackeys and Mr. Dicker's apoplectic hall porter did not receive Hugh with any enthusiasm. They were evidently of opinion that "the young seafaring party," as they afterwards described him over their beer in the servants' hall, had committed a grave offence in knocking where he should have rung. But they forgave him, in consideration of his youth and air of manly confidence, and told him, languidly, that Mr. Dicker was in the City, and would not leave the City

until four o'clock, "or perhaps five;" a piece of information that was imparted regretfully, so it seemed, and with a sort of pity for the unfortunate master of the fine house, and who probably worked a great deal harder than any servant in his pay. Even Hugh could see a certain incongruity between Mr. Dicker's palatial mansion, with its liveried loungers in the marbled entrance-hall, its innumerable plate-glass windows, and the hammer-clothed carriage at the door, with the wigged coachman dozing on the box, and the superb bays clattering their silver harness, and tossing their handsome heads, and the feverish flurry and care of Mr. Dicker's own existence.

Hugh turned his back on fashionable London, and went eastwards again among

the narrowing streets which even the Great Fire had failed to widen, and the thickening swarms of business men, from the merchant prince to the messenger fresh from his bracket, that jostled one another where once the Wild Prince, with overgrown Sir John rolling along at his side, and all the ruffianly swash-bucklers, Nym, Bardolph, Pistol, and the rest, swaggering at his heels, received the salutations of flat-capped apprentices and smug citizens of Cheape. Arrived at Guildhall Chambers, Hugh sent in his name.

“You’ll have to wait a goodish time, young man,” said the clerk, whose stool was the nearest to the open door of the waiting-room. “There’s plenty before you, you see.”

And indeed there were a good many

suitors for the advantage of an interview with the great Mr. Dicker. A cabinet minister, or the editor-in-chief of the *Jupiter* newspaper, is not more besieged and beset than are those gold-compelling sons of Fortune who are reputed to be always lucky in their dealings, and who can cull the auriferous rose of commerce without pricking their deft fingers with the thorns that guard it. However, Hugh had not so long to wait as the sympathetic clerk had predicted.

“Mr. Dicker will see you now, sir,” said a messenger, bustling up; and once more was Hugh ushered into the capitalist’s presence.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. DICKER.

“GLAD to see you, Captain Ashton!” said Mr. Dicker, good-naturedly, as he gave Hugh a forefinger to shake, and waved him to a chair. “Knew your name at once—not likely to forget it—for, my dear sir, you have rendered me a still greater service than I was aware of, when last we met.”

Hugh was pleased with the cordiality of this reception, but his looks expressed a

not unnatural surprise, which the capitalist was not slow to note. He condescended to explain.

“ I told you, Captain Ashton, that the papers which that poor, faithful fellow Purkiss—I shall never get such a clerk again—brought over in the purple bag, and which your courage preserved for me, were of considerable value. They were indeed of very considerable value—more so than I dreamed of. He had done very well indeed, had Purkiss, as my agent out there ; and I am a richer man, if I chose to realize to-morrow, by— Well, well, never mind how much—what with wool, and copper, and land, and gold, and the rest of it. The securities thus saved represented something worth having, Captain Ashton.”

Hugh had no doubt that they did ; but

he scarcely knew what to say in answer to Mr. Dicker's harmless vaunt, and merely smiled.

“I am a warm man, as we say in the City, as you may possibly have heard, Captain Ashton,” said Mr. Dicker, rattling some money in one of his pockets in a slow, lazy manner, as though he enjoyed the tinkle of the sovereigns as they slipped one by one through his fingers.

“I can well believe that, sir,” answered Hugh, who had no doubts as to the warmth, financially, of his moneyed acquaintance.

“And this colonial business has brought in a very tidy return, very tidy,” said the capitalist, tapping his still sound and strong front teeth with an ivory paper-cutter. “You ought to have your share, Mr. Ashton.”

“My share, sir? I can hardly understand you!” answered Hugh, in some surprise.

“Yes, yes,” returned Mr. Dicker, half impatiently, and with a glance at the clock. “You preserved for me vouchers of no trifling value, without which, had they gone to the bottom of the sea like that poor fellow Purkiss, I should have met with vexatious delay and practical loss, in endeavouring to assert my rights. So, as a matter of business, and as usual among business men, I shall be happy”—and he picked up a pen, and rustled over the leaves of his cheque-book as he spoke—“to write you an order on Clink and Scales, of Lombard Street, for——”

“Excuse me if I interrupt you, Mr. Dicker,” broke in Hugh Ashton, the colour

mounting to his sun-bronzed cheek and brow. “So far as I understand, you desire to do me a kindness, but a kindness which I cannot accept. It was not to solicit money from you that I came here to-day.”

The capitalist, in the very act of filling up the promised cheque, looked up at Hugh’s face and arched his eyebrows in very genuine surprise. According to his experience, which was a tolerably wide one, money came amiss, on whatsoever pretext, to nobody; and he had known it to be eagerly grasped at, not to say angled for, by the very finest of fine gentlemen and ladies with whom he had conducted negotiations in the course of an active and pushing career. Colonels and countesses, legislators and leaders of fashion, each and

all of these had proved willing to take a bribe for services to be rendered in puffing some newly-blown soap-bubble of the Stock Exchange, provided that the bribe were delicately administered, and called a commission. And here was this youngster—a master-mariner, an ex-fisherman—whose tone and countenance expressed actual indignation at the offer of an eleemosynary draft on Clink and Scales.

“Bless me!” exclaimed Mr. Dicker, hardly knowing whether to be irritated or not; “you really are a very extraordinary young man!”

“Do not mistake my meaning, Mr. Dicker,” said Hugh, quietly; “I am sure that your intention was kind, though I cannot accept the kindness in the form of ready money. That is all.”

“ You’ll never get on in life, Mr. Ashton, never !” returned the self-made man, laying down his pen, and surveying Hugh with a look of mingled pity and admiration.

“ I daresay that I shall not, sir, in the usual sense of the word,” answered Hugh, with a slight smile.

“ Well, well,” said the capitalist, slowly, and with a sort of philosophic tolerance of error, “ it makes a difference, of course, in matters of business, whether one has learned to look upon things in a business light.—But what can I do for you, Captain Ashton, since I must not draw you a cheque ? I am your debtor, very much your debtor, for the service rendered the other day, and that even more so than I thought when last I saw you. Along with my securities were certain private papers that had been de-

posited in an Australian bank, and the recovery of which would be of the utmost consequence to a poor friend of mine. I call him poor; but time was that in our intercourse *I* was the obliged party." And Mr. Dicker laid considerable stress upon the personal pronoun, as though the circumstance of his being under obligations to somebody else had been a portent indeed.

"Yes," continued the capitalist, who had grown earnest now, as some newly-awakened train of thought occurred to him, "I don't mind telling you, between ourselves, that I was once a very poor and struggling man, and didn't find too many hands stretched out, I can tell you, to help me as I toiled up those lower rungs of the ladder of life that are always the hardest to climb. This friend of whom I speak, a gentleman

born, stepped out of his way to do me a good turn, and I keep the memory of his kindness green and fresh, Mr. Ashton, I assure you. I cannot mention his name, even would it interest you, as of course it could not—reasons against that! But, at any rate, there were papers belonging rightly to him in that purple bag that you prevented from becoming flotsam and jetsam, and that he would gladly see, if only I could find his present address, poor fellow! Dear me, I have wandered sadly from the point. It is not often in the City that we have the leisure or the inclination to indulge in sentiment.—And now, what can I do for you, my dear sir?" asked the capitalist, again becoming conscious of the clock, and of the candidates for admission that were chafing in his ante-room.

Hugh answered modestly enough that he had come to Guildhall Chambers for the purpose of asking Mr. Dicker's advice. He had left Cornwall for ever, had resigned his late appointment, and was now in search of something to do.

Mr. Dicker pursed up his lips, and contemplated his young acquaintance with a rueful sort of interest.

“Rolling stones, eh—but you know best, of course,” he said, again tapping the teeth, of which he was proud, with the paper-cutter. “Sudden—wasn’t it?”

“I see, sir, that you think I ought to have stayed,” answered Hugh, in his frank, fearless way; “and, as a man of the world, I am sure you judge rightly. I have a sorrowful conviction in the truth of the old proverb you quoted but now, and wish for

nothing more than to be steady. It was no mere restlessness, believe me, that made me give up my ship and leave Treport."

"No, no ; of course not," said Mr. Dicker, casting about for a motive, and, as men of the world always do, looking out for a vice or a weakness on which to graft it.

That Hugh had left the Tug and Salvage Company in disgrace—that he had done, in common parlance, anything wrong, his previous experience of Hugh's conduct, and the singularly noble bearing of the young sailor, forbade him to believe. The capitalist was for a moment at fault. Suddenly his countenance cleared. "Yes, yes ; the lad must be in love, and crossed as to his wooing, either by disinclination on the

fair one's part, or, much more probably, by the harsh prudence of parents." And Mr. Dicker, who regarded love as a youthful disorder akin to measles or whooping-cough, was sincerely sorry that his young friend should apparently have taken the complaint in an aggravated form, injurious to his worldly prospects.

"I hardly know what to advise," he said, thoughtfully, rattling the sovereigns in his pocket. "Would you like to go to sea again, or abroad?"

"I should prefer," answered Hugh, with some hesitation, "to stay in England, if I could but earn a maintenance by anything within my power to do."

"Stop—I have it!" exclaimed Mr. Dicker, beginning to toss and tumble over some papers that lay before him on the table.

“ We want a station-master. I am deputy-chairman—you may have heard as much, perhaps—of the Extreme South Line, at —where is it?—yes, Hollow Oak, in Dorsetshire. The manager sent me word on the subject a fortnight ago, and the appointment rests with me, since old Sir Bodkin, the chairman, is not in a fit state of health to attend to details. Would Hollow Oak suit you? It is a quiet place, somewhere west of the New Forest. And the salary is a hundred and something a year; whether forty or sixty, I cannot remember. Of course there are coals and candles, and of course there is a house to live in—and those, I suppose, are all the advantages of the situation. Such as it is, will you accept the place?”

“ Certainly, and gratefully, Mr. Dicker,”

said Hugh, with quick decision. "If you will give me the place you speak of, I will promise to do my best in the duties I shall be called upon to fill."

"Then, very well," said the capitalist, who by this time had become painfully conscious of the clock and the flight of time, and the many interviews that lay before him. "I will send you in the morning, by a clerk, your credentials. You will then have nothing to do but to start by an afternoon train—there is one, I think, at two—yes, at two—and you will be at Hollow Oak at six or thereabouts. And what, Captain Ashton, is your address?"

Hugh mentioned "Shadwick's Inn," Shadwick Place, E.C.

"How very odd!" answered the capitalist, again oblivious of clock and engagement.

“*I* know the place; but very few, even among Londoners, do. It was in the little gloomy three-cornered coffee-room of that secluded inn that the friend I have mentioned—and whose papers I have here—met me, and lent me the money which—No matter, Captain Ashton—he was a gentleman by birth, and—Never mind. Something in you reminds me of him; I cannot tell why. Good-bye, dear lad!” And he gave Hugh his whole hand to shake; and there was an end of the interview.

CHAPTER XVII.

MAUD GOES HOME.

THERE was a stir and a suppressed ferment of excitement in Llosthuel Court, to which every human heart pulsated in strange unison. A letter from Maud's mother had arrived the day before, summoning Maud home, if Alfringham, her uncle's rural palace, might be called by such a name, as the widow of Colonel Stanhope did not scruple to call it. As a general rule, Mrs. Stanhope's letters were of no very

great account. She sent a good many of them, having belonged to a letter-writing generation, and to a gushing age. But now, as Lord Penrith's mouthpiece, she spoke, or rather wrote, with authority. Her brother, she said, was worse—well he never was—but now his state of health was critical, and Lord Penrith was longing for Maud's return. “Come *at once!*” said the letter; and, if italics and underscoring could prevail, Maud should indeed have felt herself bound to hurry.

“Of course she must go!” the Dowager had said, decisively, but regretfully, for the loss of her pretty niece at Llosthuel meant to her the almost hopeless isolation of a benevolent female despot among her servants and tenantry. She had a few clergy to visit, and here and there a scarce family

of the estated class, and that was all. She paid the penalty, in a social point of view, of dwelling in a picturesque and impossible corner of England, near which no ties of sport or business can fetter the well-to-do.

“Nobody lives in Cornwall,” Lady Mary Tattles would say, if you asked her, at five-o’clock tea, in Grosvenor Place, what were your social prospects in the ancient realm of King Mark; and Lady Mary would not be far wrong. Squires are rare in Cornwall, and country society widely scattered. Lady Larpent lost a good deal in losing Maud.

But Maud must go. The wishes of old men in Lord Penrith’s position are paramount. He was so rich, he was so free to do as he liked with Alfringham, and all

that appertained to it, that had he chosen to pick out a stable-boy as his heir, or, like Pope's Miser, to endow a college or a cat, none dared even to venture on remonstrance. Certainly Maud must go. There was packing in hot haste. Maud's maid and my Lady's abigail impeded one another as they folded, and packed, and locked trunks, and found that things inestimable had been overlooked, and at the last moment thrust them in, and kept everybody within their influence in a mild state of feverish flurry. Sir Lucius Larpent was to escort his cousin to Alfringham. Nothing, considering the relationship, could have been more proper, or, to Maud's taste, less congenial; but still she had to submit.

“I am very sorry to part with you, my

dear ; but of course in such a case there is no help for it. And it is a comfort that, next week, Edgar and Willie come home from school," said Lady Larpent. And then came the parting itself, and the drive to the station, and the railway journey itself, swift and smooth, eastwards from that far outpsot of sea-girt Britain where Llosthuel looked out over the endless billows of the Atlantic.

Young ladies are seldom given to abstract speculation, and it is not very likely that Maud Stanhope contrasted the comfort and monotonous ease with which the modern first-class passenger is conveyed, amid rugs and cushions, sun-blinds and foot-warmers, to his destination, with the pilgrimage that a winter's journey from Cornwall once was, even for travellers of

her own rank in life. No more anxiety, nowadays, as to floods certain to break bridges and render fords impassable; no more fear of highwaymen-haunted heaths, and no dread of the clumsy family coach, painfully dragged along the vile roads by six horses, being buried in a snowdrift, or “stugged in the mire,” on wild Dartmoor. No more riding, belated, with chilled feet that could scarcely feel the steel stirrup, and the collar of the loose “horseman’s coat” turned up to screen off the driving drift, as the bewildered guide tried to regain the track, easily missed when once the short December day had blackened into early night, which led across the waste. We most of us, however, forget or ignore the sufferings of those who went before us, and merely resent any trivial

interruption in the clockwork regularity of existing arrangements.

There is no railway-station nearer to Alfringham Hall than the small one of Hollow Oak, four miles and a half away. Lord Penrith had, indeed, like many other lords of lands, done his best in Parliament to exorcise the railway from his estate, and had reluctantly consented under compulsion to derive indirect benefit from the detested innovation. At Hollow Oak, then, Maud and her cousin Sir Lucius found, on alighting there, one of "my lord's" carriages waiting for them. For a good many miles round Alfringham Maud's uncle was "my lord" in popular speech, and Cowper's mighty Monsieur Nongtonpaw scarcely seemed a more universal proprietor than he was. Some such reflection probably sug-

gested itself to the self-seeking mind of Sir Lucius. He had not been very talkative during the hours of the railway journey, burying himself in his newspapers or lounging in his corner, with half-shut eyes, and leaving his fair kinswoman to her novel and her own thoughts. Once, indeed, the baronet had spoken with a certain amount of energy, but even then the choice of a topic was unfortunate.

“ You can’t think how glad I am,” he had said, amiably, “ that that confounded fisherman fellow that my mother chose to take up, has had to take himself off from our neighbourhood. I don’t profess to know what he had done to make the country too hot to hold him——”

“ I am sure, Lucius, that you do Mr. Ashton cruel wrong!” interrupted Maud,

with flashing eyes and quivering lip ; “ and that you are unjust in attributing bad motives to his leaving us—for his leaving Treport, I mean. I never saw anyone in whose honour——”

“ Honour !” somewhat rudely broke in Sir Lucius, “ honour ! forsooth, when you are talking of a cad like that ! But, if you women will insist on making a model hero of the man, it is useless to argue the point.” And he savagely banged down the window nearest him, and, turning his face away, neither spoke to his beautiful cousin nor looked at her for many a mile. On the way, in Lord Penrith’s carriage, to Alfringham, the baronet found his tongue again. “ I owe you an apology, Maud,” he said, “ for my uncivil speech an hour ago ; I was irritable, and I behaved like a bear.

I do hope you will forgive me, Maud."

"Well," replied Miss Stanhope, in her gentle voice, "let us think no more of a hasty word!"

"But, Maud, dear Maud," went on the baronet, in his most persuasive accents, "will you not push your generous impulse a little further, and give me hope—a little hope? If only you knew how I longed for it!" he added, with an earnestness that seemed real.

"You mean——" Maud came to a stop here. It was not for her to interpret her kinsman's meaning.

Then Sir Lucius spoke out, glibly enough. It was Maud's love he asked for. It was Maud, whose consent to be his wife, withheld from him till now, he sought as a suppliant. He did not, he

would not, press her for an immediate answer. She need not say "Yes," or enter on a formal engagement at once. Only let her show a little kindness, only let her tell him that he need not despair. A word, a look, a pressure from her little hand—of which, at an early part of the conversation, he had contrived to possess himself—would suffice to revive his hopes, and then he would urge her no more.

But Maud Stanhope was not foolish enough to purchase a respite from unwelcome addresses by giving any such assurance, on which a future claim would certainly be founded. Gently, but resolutely, she drew her hand away.

"I can but repeat, Lucius," she said, as kindly as she could, but quite steadily, "what I said to you before, at Llosthuel.

You had better learn to regard me simply as a friend—as your sister, if you will—for what you now wish can never be."

"Come, come, Maud; this is not fair treatment for a man, after all that has come and gone," returned Sir Lucius, reproachfully.

"Nothing has come or gone between us two," answered Maud, firmly, "that gives you the right to complain of unfair treatment at my hands. As a friend, I can never cease to regard you; but your wife I shall never be."

"And would you thwart everybody's wishes—and—and upset the family arrangement, just for a whim?" cried Sir Lucius, very angrily. "You know I must be Lord Penrith. You know our uncle will leave every stick and stone of the estate to you.

And it has always been an understood thing that the title and the property were to come together again. You would be a peeress, Maud. And it is a shame, indeed it is, to throw over a man as you do me!"

Sir Lucius, in spite of all remonstrance, enlarged upon this theme so vehemently, and became so eloquent as to the wickedness of his kinswoman's conduct in rejecting his proposals, that, when the carriage drew up before the stately doors of Alfringham, Maud was in tears; and it was all that she could do to preserve a tolerably decorous air of well-bred calm in passing through the lighted hall, with its double file of liveried serving-men drawn up for the reception of the new arrivals. Mrs. Stanhope, who had come three steps beyond the

door of her favourite pink drawing-room, to meet her daughter, saw the glistening traces of tears on Maud's eyelashes as she kissed her, and very likely guessed something approximately near the truth.

"So kind of you to come, Lucius," said the faded beauty, putting out her jewelled fingers to her nephew. "You will stay some time, I hope, to cheer us up at Alfringham."

"I shall be off to-morrow, thank you! I only came to see Maud home," answered the baronet, with a brow like a thunder-cloud.

Mrs. Stanhope sighed. She saw that her nephew was in a very evil temper, and augured ill for the prospects of the family arrangement, which she had as much at

heart as it was possible for her to care for anything. And this was Maud's welcome to her Dorsetshire home.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT HOLLOW OAK STATION.

IT was dark when Hugh Ashton, stepping from the second-class carriage in which he had travelled from London, alighted on the low brick platform of Hollow Oak Station. Only two or three other passengers got out there, and they were apparently natives of the place; for the porters in attendance greeted them with a growl and a nod, such as in agricultural districts pass current as a polite form of

salutation to an acquaintance. But they looked at Hugh with some curiosity, as if marvelling who he might be ; and when the steam-whistle had sounded, and the train jarred and jolted itself again into motion, like some slow-moving stream of sluggish lava on a mountain side, the most intelligent of them touched his cap slightly, saying : “ Going anywheres, sir, near here ? ”

“ No,” answered Hugh, smiling. “ I am going to stay where I am. You, I suppose, are the head-porter, and I daresay are in charge of the keys ? ”

“ Our new station-master, sir ? I thought as much,” said the man, civilly, and again touching his official cap in recognition of his superior. “ I’ve got the keys handy, sir ; and if you’ll just step across—— ”

Under the porter’s guidance, Hugh

crossed the rails, and gained the little wooden platform, screened by the buildings of the station, which corresponded to the little brick platform on the down side. There was a sleepy air about the tiny booking-office, and the tinier waiting-room, and the very clock ticked drowsily, as if its constitution, town-made article though it was, had been affected by the somnolent influences of the place.

The station-master's house, of red brick, like the rest of the buildings, stood a little apart from the business part of the premises, and was trim and in good repair, as such edifices, the property of a wealthy Company, usually are. A creeper, the leafless tendrils of which looked withered and bare, but which waited for the touch of the vernal sun to put forth leaf and bud

again, had been carefully trained over the front. The head-porter unlocked the door, and acted as cicerone in exhibiting the four rooms and a kitchen of which the tenement consisted. There was furniture, of the sort that is put in by contract, and calculated, very properly, to be durable rather than ornamental. There were coals, and there were lamps, gas being, at Hollow Oak, a non-existent source of illumination. The porter bustled about to trim and light a lamp, and to kindle a fire in the chilled parlour grate.

“Mrs. Waite—Mother Waite we call her, mostly—the old woman who did the work for the last station-master, who happened to be unmarried—I suppose like yourself, sir—lives hard by, at this end of the village. A respectable, tidy old soul she is,

if you'd like me to give her a call in?"

Hugh thanked the man, who seemed to be a good specimen of the railway servant on his promotion, and expressed himself as willing to retain the services of the tidy Mrs. Waite.

"I feel new and strange here," he said. "And a ship's deck has been more familiar to me, hitherto, than the plank platform of a railway station. Is there anything I ought to do, as a matter of duty, to-night?"

"Nothing worth mentioning, sir," the porter said. "It might be as well, for the sake of practice, to look out, and see all clear, when the night express goes by—and so with the up-mail. Never mind the heavy train at 9.45. I'll attend to that, as I have done this fortnight past, since Mr.

Weeks left. And then there's the locking-up. And that will be about all. But, since it's late, and there's nothing ready in the house, perhaps your best way, sir, would be to get a bit of supper at the 'Beville Arms'."

Hugh could not repress a slight start at the mention of the name.

"Why, 'Beville Arms'?" he asked, in a tone of assumed carelessness.

"On account of my lord, sir," returned the porter, with some surprise. "I forgot," he added, "you were a stranger here. I mean my Lord Penrith. Most about here belongs to him, and you can see his grand house, Alfringham, on a clear day, from the ridge a mile off from where we stand. That's why it's the 'Beville Arms,' sir."

Hugh made no further remark, but quietly proceeded to take the porter's sensible advice, hiring the experienced Mrs. Waite to undertake the charge of his modest housekeeping, ordering the inevitable mutton chop and potatoes, which the neat public-house of the hamlet—over the door of which creaked the signboard painted with the Beville coat-of-arms—was competent to supply, and presently addressed himself to acquiring by examination of the printed rules and time-tables some knowledge of the duties that devolved upon him in his new capacity.

“How strange,” muttered Hugh to himself, when at length he laid his head upon the pillow of the makeshift bed which tidy Dame Waite had hastily prepared for him—“how strange that, of all places in the

world, the hand of Fate should have led me *here!* The name of Hollow Oak Station at first suggested nothing to my memory or to my fancy. But Alfringham? Surely it cannot be for nothing that Mr. Dicker's good-nature has consigned me to this out-of-the-way spot. Surely there must be something more than mere coincidence in the fact that I, of all men living, have been suddenly transferred to this place, of all places in the south of England. I feel as though I were groping and stumbling through darkness along a rugged road, and yet with a vague confidence that I should reach the goal at last."

By the first gleam of the cold grey winter's dawn, Hugh Ashton, an early riser always, as sailors and colonists commonly are, was astir. The station, when he

emerged from his own little solitary dwelling, and stood alone on the platform, looked ghostly and cheerless enough ; and yet, as the wintry sun struggled through the broken clouds, he could see that in summer at least the place must be lacking in few of the elements of sylvan beauty. Even the deep cutting within sight had its steep banks thickly planted—perhaps through the care of some floricultural station-master departed—with rhododendrons, that in due season must carpet the slopes with gay colour. The country around was broken and undulating, and studded here and there with dark copses of holly and ash, or with clumps of fine trees—relics, it may be, of the primeval forest that Canute first, and William after, enlarged and meted out as a Royal Chase.

“ I am glad, for more reasons than one, that I am here,” said Hugh to himself. “ My station would have pleased me less had it been among the fat pastures of Leicestershire, or perhaps among the bulrushes and endless windmills of the fen country in the far east.”

It was not, to all appearance, a very bustling career which lay before Hugh Ashton at Hollow Oak. Edmunds, the civil head-porter, who, as a native of the village, though a travelled one, felt bound to say a good word for the borders of the New Forest and all things thereunto appertaining, described the work to be done at Hugh’s new station as easy in the extreme.

“ Business hereabouts is slack,” he said, apologetically for the quiet that prevailed.

“But in truth, sir, there’s never much of it. No mineral traffic, no manufactures, you see. A timber-train now and then, going to some dockyard, or a cattle-train bound for London, we may have ; but that’s about all.”

Everything was neat and orderly, on a small scale, at Hollow Oak. A slim strippling in uniform sat in his narrow den, full of coils of copper wire, and clock-faces marked with cabalistic characters, and all the miscellaneous properties of a telegraph office, listening, so it seemed, as necromancers of old hearkened to the whisperings of some familiar demon, to the sharp click, click of the mystic little needles that trembled ever, stirred by the unseen subtle influence many a mile away. The porters went about their duty as demurely as

though their business had lain in the starting—every axle tapped, and every flange examined—of the “ Flying Scotchman ” or the “ Wild Irishman ” on its rush of rocket-like swiftness, with a cargo of valuable lives, to Holyhead or Edinburgh. The ticket-clerk was but a boy, but sedate and smart; and the only confessed lounger was the green-coated railway policeman, who seemed to have nothing to do but to brighten his buttons and tighten his belt.

There was, after all, a queer resemblance between a station and a ship, which, after a little while, suggested itself to Hugh Ashton, and tended to reconcile him to his new duties. There was for the station-master the same round of routine cares, the same sense of daily and hourly responsibility,

that there is for the captain. The work might be a trifle more mechanical, the nerves were not braced by the sharp but wholesome tonic of sea-danger ; but the similarity seemed to Hugh beyond dispute. He had his watches now to keep, on account of the night trains, as he had done many a time at sea. He had even his own deck to walk, in the shape of a boarded platform which, however, was neither tight enough nor clean enough, through constant holystoning and the free use of broom and mop, to please a sailor's eye.

“ He'll be a good station-master—better by long chalks than old Weeks—but somehow those seafaring chaps can turn their hands to most trades,” said Edmunds the porter, in the tap-room of the “ Beville Arms.” And here it may be noted that

Edmunds, though a good head-porter, and hopeful of promotion, never expected to take such a leap up the ladder of advancement as to become in his own person a station-master. Such functionaries are commissioned officers in the railway army ; whereas porters are likely to rise no higher than does, in a parallel line of life, some sergeant-major, staff or regimental, who is respected in the service, and fairly well off, but who will rise no more.

There was leisure enough, Hugh found, at Hollow Oak. Highly salaried masters of important stations in great commercial centres might be half distracted by the incessant calls on their attention ; but at that haven of repose the commandant of the little garrison of railway servants had time to ride a hobby of his own, be the

same butterfly-hunting or pigeon-fancying, gardening or authorship.

The country, as has been said, was pretty, and in parts wild, lying as it did on the confines of the New Forest.

“They call us Hollow Oak, Mr. Ashton,” said the explanatory Edmunds, glad of a new listener, “because of the oak itself, five hundred yards, as the crow flies, from Hollow Oak churchyard, on the crest of the Ridge. There it stands, the grand old tree, a mere shell now; but a goodish lot of people could stand inside. It’s been printed about, it has, in many books, and many learned gents come to see it. If it wasn’t standing, as I daresay it was, when Julius Cæsar came, I’ll be sworn it was when Rufus came to die of the arrow. It’s been hollow this many a year; but——”

“But what?” asked Hugh, as his informant hesitated.

“They do call it the Haunted Oak, as well,” answered Edmunds, dropping his voice. “Anyhow, odd sounds are heard, and folks keep clear of it on a dark night.”

“Does not the Ridge, as you call it, on which the oak stands, overlook the Bullbury Road?” asked Hugh, suddenly.

“It does. You’ve read of it, sir, be-like?” replied the porter.

“And is there not a place, between the Ridge and a brook, called—let me see—Calder Brook—a place called Lambert’s Stile?”

“Murder Stile, we always call it now, sir, or else Bloody Stile, ever since one of my Lord Penrith’s sons shot the other

beside it, five-and-twenty years ago, or more."

"I have heard the story," answered Hugh, calmly. "When I have time, I will stroll out and see the place."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN PERIL.

“THIS, then, must be the place where the fatal deed was done. It has been often in my thoughts—so often that it is difficult to believe that these eyes of mine behold it for the first time.”

So soliloquised Hugh Ashton, as he stood beside a stile giving access to a field across which a footpath led, in the direction of the wooded Ridge. Behind him was the narrow country road leading, as a moss-

grown old finger-post declared, to Bullbury, Mepham, and Greenend.

The field through which the path wound was rush-grown pasture-land, shut in by a huge thorny hedge and tall bank, over-grown with giant fern. The stile itself was, to look upon, merely an ugly hog-backed stile, of brown oak, with stepping-stones worn with age and use, and which would have been voted an awkward obstacle by even the most intrepid of fox-hunters. Such as it was, Hugh Ashton stood gazing at it long and fixedly.

“Lambert’s Stile?” said a little crow-boy, who now came past, in answer to an inquiry on Hugh’s part. “Not as I knows on, master. Bloody Stile, this one is.”

And the urchin went slowly back from his dinner to his work, without manifesting

any inquisitiveness as to Hugh himself, or the motive of his question.

Hugh Ashton drew a deep breath, and surveyed the spot as if resolved to imprint every local detail indelibly upon his memory.

“From behind yonder hedge,” he said, “tall, and old, and fern-grown, doubtless, even a quarter of a century ago, the fatal shot was fired. There, no doubt, the assassin crouched amid the fern and brambles, awaiting the coming of his victim. I can fancy Marmaduke Beville, wilful, headstrong, careless of danger, advancing along the path without a thought of the violent death that was so near. It was sudden, terribly sudden. I can see the flash of the gun, and see the blue smoke curl upwards from amidst the fern, and the man that

fired the shot—— Ah! if I could but drag him to justice, in the open light of day, and right the cruel wrong that has endured so long, and wrecked a nobler life than his who died that day!"

There seemed to be a hideous fascination about the ill-omened spot, for it was difficult for Hugh to tear himself away. He did not actually, however, cross the stile or strike into the footpath, but avoided both with an involuntary repugnance that his reason could not conquer. He went on along the Bullbury Road for some distance, until at last he reached a narrow lane, bordered by ragged hedges, which evidently led towards the Ridge.

A few minutes of brisk walking brought him to the verge of a belt of woodland, through which a track, available for foot-

passengers, led. Hugh struck into this path; and presently emerged upon the very crest of the Ridge itself, a long chain of low hills, wooded yet as to its sides, but on the highest portion of which the trees had fallen beneath the axe, leaving but a tangled mass of shrubs and brushwood, where once the towering elm and spreading beech had lifted their proud heads sunwards.

Hugh took a steady survey of the wintry landscape, new to him, yet by report so strangely familiar! He could have made a shrewd guess at the real names of more than one of the landmarks, unseen before, that met his gaze. That clump of fir-trees, rising black against the sky, must be Scranny Holt, famous for its fox-earths; and yonder waste Cheam Common, where

a battle had taken place between Royalists and Roundheads early in the Civil War. And that grand house, on whose many windows the sun threw a gleam of pale gold, standing amongst hereditary oaks of mighty growth, with its park stretching miles away, and its mass of building suggesting the proportions less of a mansion than of a palace, could be no other than stately Alfringham.

Alfringham! Hugh's heart beat high for a moment, and his eyes glistened as he caught the first glimpse of the majestic pile of which he had heard so much, beneath very different skies, and in the midst of a very different vegetation, from those on which he now looked.

“And to think that a word from me would——”

Thus much he said ; but he did not complete the sentence, and with a cold, proud smile, turned away. He did not throw another glance towards magnificent Alfringham, but rambled on, nearer and nearer to where, like a wall, rose up on the horizon's edge the girdling belt of trees that marked the edge of the forest. It was a desolate, but in some respects not an uninviting landscape on which he looked. He had turned his back on the fertile vale reaching to Bullbury and far beyond, which formed the most profitable portion of Lord Penrith's estate, and what he saw beyond him was a wild and picturesque tract, where half-savage herds of ponies cropped the short herbage of some heath ; or peat-cutters could be distinguished far away plying their trade beside a swamp, reed-crested ; where

patches of woodland were frequent, and few indeed the thatched roofs and wreaths of smoke that indicated human abodes.

More and more did the country resemble a wilderness as Hugh Ashton approached the boundary of the Royal Chase. There had fallen on the previous night a sprinkling of snow, which on the upland remained, unthawed by the pale sun, and crackled crisply beneath his feet as he advanced, pushing his way through stunted heather and lofty fern, until, from a neighbouring thicket of underwood, overtopped by three or four old trees that the lopping axe had spared, the smothered sound of voices reached his ear.

He pressed on, pushing aside the nut-boughs as he came forward, and burst into

a clearing almost entirely shut in by bushes and golden-blossomed gorse, and there beheld an unaccustomed sight. On the ground, its sinewy limbs entangled in a net, lay a noble stag, gasping, and feebly struggling still to rise, while the blood streamed fast from its throat. Over the prostrate animal knelt two swarthy fellows, whose olive skins, long hair, and glittering black eyes left no doubt as to their caste, one of whom was firmly grasping the antlers of the dying stag, while the other held in his hand a curious sort of knife, with a broad blade and a carved handle. Two others of the tribe who, leaning against the trunk of a scathed wych-elm, were surveying with much interest the proceedings of their brethren, started as they heard the dry leaves and snow crackle beneath Hugh's step.

“A spy! a spy!” they exclaimed.
“Ware! Ishmael!”

And the man with the knife turned his head and saw Hugh Ashton within a few feet of him.

“So much the worse for the Busne, if he’s alone!” muttered Ishmael, scrambling up and clutching the knife more firmly.

Hugh took in the situation—none of the pleasantest, it must be admitted—at a glance. The sight of the deer—escaped no doubt from the limits of the Royal Forest, if indeed those boundaries did not include the place on which he stood—dying on the ground, of the gipsy crew around, of the net and the knife, told its own tale.

The wanderers had been busy in securing

to themselves, as dwellers in and near the New Forest were till recently wont to do, an illicit share of those rights of vert and venison which are by statute and common law the exclusive property of the crown. And there was no mistaking the character of the unfriendly glances which those whom he had disturbed in the course of their poaching transaction threw towards him, the intruder on a region which they probably considered as their own hunting-ground.

“Come, come!” Hugh called out in his clear deep voice; “I am no keeper, my lads, or ranger, whichever they call it, so I have no wish to interfere with you, unless —Ah, my fine fellow, I can’t stand that!” he added, less amicably, as a lithe, long-haired stripling, the youngest of the group,

stole round and aimed a blow at Hugh's head with the but-end of a rusty and short-barrelled gun. And before the young gipsy could repeat the stroke, cleverly eluded, the gun was wrenched from his grasp, and that with a force which sent him staggering into the midst of his friends. Ishmael, who seemed the strongest and most resolute of the party, came forward, knife in hand. The others clutched their heavy sticks. One and all had the aspect of wild-cats brought to bay. A male gipsy, as many of us can avouch, is apt to present a singular example of how a savage nature can be kept in check by the constant presence of a civilisation that it abhors and rejects. He is sometimes sullen, not seldom orientally abject in his attempts to please. He is useful too in a spasmodic way, and

will get through a job of work, if mending be required, with a patient deftness that regular European workmen do not equal. But you can never quite trust him, and you never know when the vindictive spirit of his lawless ancestors may make itself felt. These gipsies, caught red-handed beside a slain deer, were desperate.

“There’s nothing in the gun!” exclaimed the man who was called Ishmael; “rush the Gorgio!” And he himself set the example by bounding forward, flourishing his knife. To Hugh, the information that the piece which he had captured was unloaded, was an unwelcome one; but he clubbed the gun, and, setting his back against a tree, prepared for the worst. The fiercest, as well as the strongest, of the long-haired crew was plainly Ishmael,

who now commenced the attack, brandishing the knife with which he had despatched the deer. But Hugh had had to do with those who trusted to such weapons before that day ; and he had Ishmael by the wrist, and had struck the knife out of his hand, before the gipsy could well realise the fact that he had met with more than his match. The others, however, were closing in, and the unequal scuffle could not have been long sustained, had not a weird female form flitted, spectral, from behind the trees, uttering words in a strange tongue, the sound of which produced an instant effect upon the gipsies, for they suspended their attack as though spellbound.

Hugh had not much difficulty in recognising his rescuer. It was Ghost Nan, the wild, roving mendicant woman whom he had seen

in Cornwall, and for whom he had hitherto sought in vain—the half-crazed gipsy who had threatened and alarmed Maud Stanhope within rifle-shot of Lady Larpent's gates. She stepped forward now, with the air and bearing of a queen, between Hugh and his scowling assailants.

“Lay not a finger on the Gorgio!” she said. “Seek not to harm a hair of his head, a shred of his garments, unless ye would have the hand ye lift dry and wither, and the eyes grow dim, and the feet pine and perish, and grow feeble and frail, within the stone walls of Dorchester Jail. He is charmed, fools! charmed from hurt or ill, until his allotted task be done! Think ye, but for that, that he would ever have come here?”

The words were strange and fraught with

mystic meaning, or a madwoman's frantic fancies, as the listeners chose to take them. There was no doubt as to the impression produced upon the gipsies around. They laid aside their threatening aspect, lowered the bludgeons which had been brandished menacingly enough, and slunk off, one by one, like wolves surprised by the daylight in the outskirts of a town. Hugh remained alone, beside the dead stag, confronting the singular woman who had come between him and his foes.

"I have wished to see you more than once," said Hugh, earnestly, "dame, since you and I met at Treport. You seemed then to fancy that you knew me."

"I took you for your father!" answered Ghost Nan, with a grim laugh. "Once you scared me, young man, but now I know

better. You cannot call the dead to life, can you? Even I cannot do that!" she added, frantically.

Hugh thought that he saw the gleam of insanity in the haggard eyes that this strange woman fixed upon his face.

"If you can," resumed the gipsy, after a pause, "go down to Bloody Stile, where I saw you stand to-day, and try your power! Marmaduke Beville, he that died there, and left the place its evil name, should surely rise, if the dead can rise, at your command. Or perhaps the heavy marble of his tomb, the heavy lead of his coffin, may keep him down, ha, ha! and make him deaf to your voice. I saw the funeral pass down the park at Alfringham, a goodly show—and I bethought me of how still and low he lay, on the grass, among the nettles and king-fern!"

“ Woman, you madden me! For heaven’s sake, you who know so much, tell me, do you know all? Were you present, or near to the accursed spot, when the foul deed was done? And if so, who was the treacherous villain who contrived to fling the blame of his coward crime upon one innocent, who——”

“ Ha, ha! son of the Red Hand!” interrupted Ghost Nan, with her shrill, ghastly laugh; “ would you fain bring a murderer’s neck at last to the hempen cord that has long been waiting? Well—it is your star has drawn you here; and, if your star prevail over *his*, the truth may yet be known. Meet me, if you will, beside the Hollow Oak, at moonrise, on the third night from this.”

“ I will not fail,” said Hugh; but already

Ghost Nan had glided away, as if she had been a ghost indeed, and was lost among the trees and bushes; while Hugh, with a throbbing heart and busy brain, walked back to the scene of his new duties at the railway station under his charge.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

